The New Criterion

March 1994

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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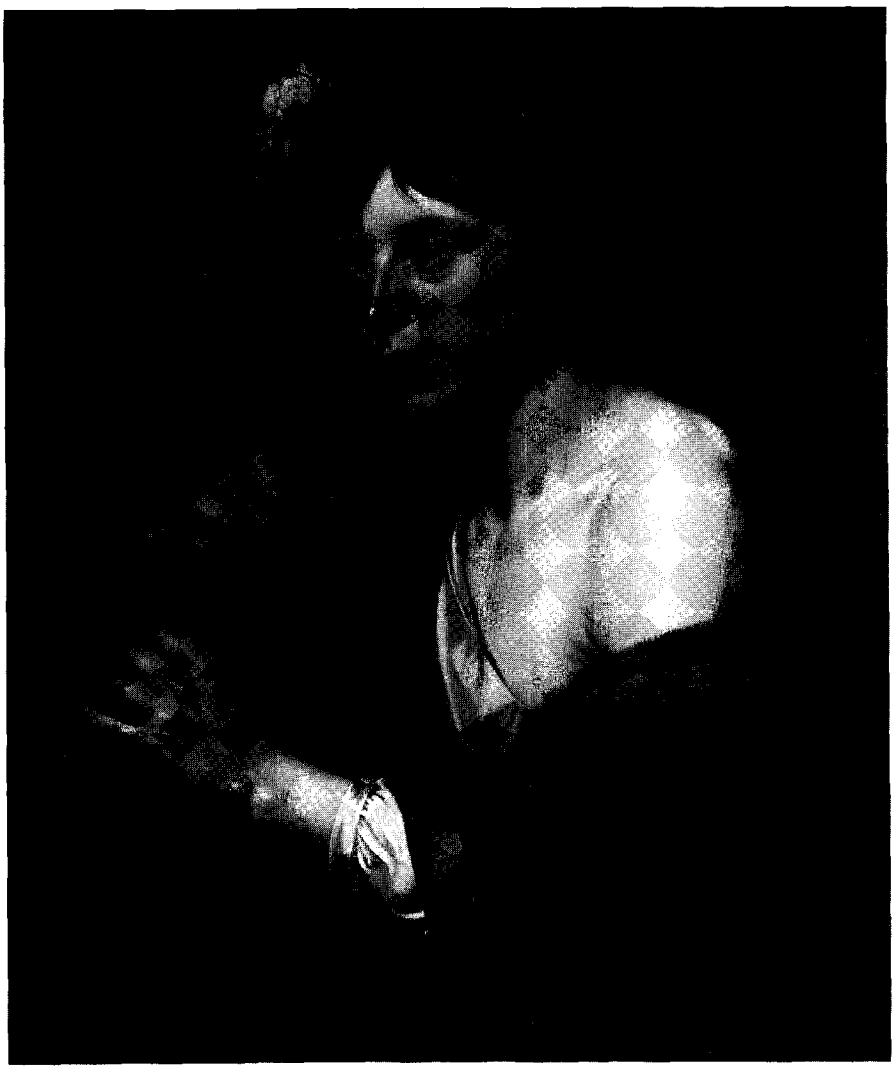

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Notes & Comments: March 1994

A prescription for fatuousness

What happens when fatuousness meets fatuousness? We were recently given a splendid example in the Op-Ed pages of *The New York Times*. The protagonists were Richard Sennett, the woolly-headed guru of kinder, gentler cities, and Richard Rorty, the influential philosopher who has become an academic celebrity by purveying a mild-mannered, analgesic sort of nihilism. At the end of January, in an expostulation called "The Identity Myth," Mr. Sennett provided us with an example of the garden-variety sort of fatuousness. The occasion for his piece was the Clinton administration's proposal to hold a series of electronic "town meetings" that would be overseen by Sheldon Hackney, the new chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The purpose of the televised meetings would be to soothe ethnic rivalries by showing how various groups "fit into the American dream." Mr. Sennett criticized the proposal, and he was right to: it's a truly fruity idea, yet another way to waste the taxpayer's money. But the *reasons* Mr. Sennett offered for his criticism were even fruitier. He was against the electronic town meetings not because they would be a waste of time and money but because they would implicitly support the idea that there is such a thing as "an American identity." For Mr. Sennett, the "very notion of an American identity is a sweeping stereotype" that must be resisted. He then went further, speaking of "the evil of a shared national identity."

We can't say we were particularly surprised by Mr. Sennett's remarks. He has long specialized in what we have come to think of as the goulash school of "cultural criticism": lots of sauce, no distinctions. Mr. Sennett knows that there are virulent forms of nationalism. He therefore decides that a healthy love of one's country and an appreciation of its achievements must be symptoms of incipient fascism. It's silly, maybe even pernicious in its naïveté, but it is prefabricated dogma in the academy today.

The surprise came a couple of weeks later when Mr. Rorty wrote in to criticize Mr. Sennett for being insufficiently . . . patriotic. Is Richard Rorty, the man who routinely warns us that there are "no such things" as moral facts, who denies that there are "any truths independent of language," etc.—is this paragon of *bien pensant* academic radicalism now coming out in support of such an old-fashioned moral virtue as patriotism? Well, sort of. In fact, Mr. Rorty provided an example of the higher fatuousness confronting Mr. Sennett's more plebian variety. He begins by speaking about the "academic departments that have become sanctuaries for left-wing political views," taking care to note that he is "glad" that these sanctuaries exist. Only there is one small problem: The academic Left "is unpatriotic."

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We are of course happy that Mr. Rorty, at least, has acknowledged that the academy is a "sanctuary" for left-wing sentiment. We've been pointing that out for years, only to be accused of right-wing paranoia and other unpleasant things. But what about patriotism? Should we not rejoice that Mr. Rorty has been vouchsafed the revelation that America is not a fount of evil and oppression? We'd like to. But we wonder what Mr. Rorty's call for patriotism can mean when it stands in contradiction to everything else he teaches. Mr. Rorty has not changed his mind about anything fundamental. It's just that he is worried by the spectacle of America-bashing that has become routine on college campuses. So he wants us to be thoroughgoing relativists who have jettisoned any commitment to truth but who are sensible enough to behave properly and display a degree of patriotic sentiment. It's an untenable demand, a prescription for fatuousness. Mr. Rorty concludes by noting that "a left that refuses to take pride in its country will have no impact on that country's politics and will eventually become an object of contempt." We fear he's wrong about the first item—the election of Bill Clinton shows that. But about the second, we can only say that it's much later than he thinks.

Beverly Sills at Lincoln Center

At first glance, the election of one-time operatic diva Beverly Sills as chairman of the board of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts seems to be a good thing. At a time when high culture and its institutions are more and more subject to destructive commercial marketing techniques, it is welcome to have an artist instead of a businessman at the head of America's largest performing-arts presenter. And at a time when the institutions of high culture are routinely called upon to advance a radical social agenda, it is equally welcome to have an artist from the classical tradition, instead of an ideologue, in a position of such responsibility.

Furthermore, Miss Sills is no stranger to Lincoln Center and its constituents, which include both the Metropolitan Opera and the City Opera. Although she made some late-career appearances at the Met, Miss Sills owes her artistic reputation almost entirely to the New York City Opera, where she sang as that company's greatest name until 1980. In 1979, she became general director of the company, a post that she held until 1989. During her administrative tenure, Miss Sills performed prodigies of fund raising, but she had rather less success in repertory and casting. Since the main work of Lincoln Center is indeed centralized fund raising—programming is left largely in the hands of the individual constituents—Miss Sills would seem to be an ideal choice for her new position. And yet memories still linger of the abrupt way in which Miss Sills left the City Opera's directorship, and with it her aggressive work on its financial behalf, to move, after a suitable pause, to an important role on the Metropolitan Opera board of directors. At the Met she immediately began to serve in a major fund-raising capacity. For this reason, as well as others that have nothing to do with Miss Sills, the City Opera is now in straitened circumstances, while the Met goes triumphantly from financial (if not artistic) strength to strength.

Miss Sills deserves every good wish in her new responsibilities. At Lincoln Center, she will not only have to raise money but also settle squabbles among the constituents. Perhaps even more important, she will have to serve as a spokesman for the idea of high culture which animated the establishment of Lincoln Center in the 1950s. That idea is hardly in fashion today, when cultural centers are supposed to concern themselves as much with political and social issues as with artistic goals. But it will not be enough for Miss Sills, in her role at Lincoln Center, to talk good art; she will have to resist pressures from inside as well as outside her domain to "open up" Lincoln Center to popular culture and close it to "elitist" art. To resist these

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pressures will take energy and constancy. We know that the vivacious Miss Sills has the energy, but after the sad story of the abandonment of the City Opera for the Metropolitan, she will have to prove her constancy.

The fringe as mainstream

Anyone who pays attention to the vagaries of academic publishing these days knows that that once-staid profession has suffered the same degradation as the academy itself. It was not so long ago that academic publishers scorned pop culture and strove to serve the scholarly and educational communities. Their primary mandate was to assist in the transmission of knowledge. Today, many academic publishers are little more than conduits for the various gender-race-class attacks on traditional moral and intellectual values that parade under the name of "the humanities." In one sense, there is nothing new or surprising about this: academic publishers are merely reflecting the prevailing ethos of the academy, as they always have.

And yet every now and again we come across something that brings us up short, reminding us that things are actually far worse than we had imagined. The Spring 1994 catalogue from the venerable publishing house of Routledge is a case in point. Buried in its pages are a handful of serious scholarly books. Indeed, a recent study of Tacitus from Routledge is the subject of a favorable review in this issue of *The New Criterion*. But the general tenor of the new Routledge catalogue—the sorts of books that are given prominence—is something else again. Terms like "postmodernism," "cultural studies," and "multiculturalism" often seem like vague abstractions: Routledge's offerings for the spring make them all too concrete.

The title chosen to lead off the catalogue is a collection of essays called *My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life During the Reagan/Bush Years*. Including something called the "Lesbian Avengers Handbook," a "practical guide for others interested in political direct action," *My American History* documents activists "as they struggled, under impossible odds and an ever-growing opposition, to articulate a movement for freedom and dignity during the Reign of Reganism." Other featured titles include *Victimized Daughters: Incest and the Development of the Female Self* ("groundbreaking"), two books on bestiality (one first published in Dutch, we are told), and *Reclaiming Sodom*, which, among other things, "argues the political use and usefulness of both Sodom and sodomy." *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* seems almost tame by comparison, even if it "chronicles the dangerous liaisons between gender, race and class that shaped British imperialism and its bloody dismantling." Perhaps our favorite title was *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us*. This really is something special. It's not every day that you come across a book written by "a woman who has been through some changes —a former heterosexual male, a one-time Scientologist and IBM salesperson, now a lesbian woman writer and actress who makes regular rounds on the TV (so to speak) talk shows." It seems unfair to bring IBM into it.

If Routledge were some sort of bizarre exception among major academic publishers—the literary equivalent of a freakish genetic accident—it would hardly be worth noticing, though its authors, poor things, would certainly deserve our pity. The problem is that Routledge does not occupy the fringe but the center of academic publishing. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the fringe has become the center. Open the catalogue of virtually any important university press today: transsexuals who were once Scientologists and IBM salesmen are still rare, it is true, but every other category of left-wing animus is well represented. Academic publishers were once among the guardians of civilization. Now they have joined the ranks of those determined to destroy it.

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At the Bauhaus: the fate of art in "the Cathedral of Socialism"

by Hilton Kramer

In the annals of the twentieth-century avant-garde, the decade following upon the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the Armistice of 1918 was distinguished by a significant shift in the relation of modernist art to radical politics. Briefly stated, it was a shift that brought about a close but uneasy and ultimately tragic alliance between modernism in the arts and socialism in politics. From this ill-fated alliance, which had far-reaching consequences for both modernist art and the future of socialist cultural policy, neither the avant-garde nor the political Left escaped unscathed. Indeed, the net effect of the principal experiments in the politicization of the avant-garde in the 1920s was to guarantee that for the rest of the twentieth century modernism would remain a special target of totalitarian cultural repression and thus peculiarly dependent for its growth and survival upon the liberties and patronage accorded by bourgeois democracy. Yet for some seven decades now, these stormy and short-lived attempts to bring modernist art into alignment with the imperatives of socialist ideology have constituted something of a model for utopian radicals still dreaming of some ideal convergence of art and politics. Even today, with socialism thoroughly discredited as a political idea and as an economic system, this model—or some fanciful variation on it, anyway—persists as a basis for the academic study of the modern period. It is all a vivid illustration of the way the intellectual life of the academy has become a sort of séance in which the living, while spurning the lessons of history, remain in perpetual communion with the departed radical spirits of the past.

There had, of course, been avant-garde movements prior to the First World War—Futurism in Italy and Russia, and Expressionism in Germany—which embraced radical ideologies as an essential component of their programs. Yet those *révolté* movements were the work of outsiders who were clearly opposed to the established social order. What was different about the avant-garde movements that erupted in the wake of the Revolution in Russia and the end of the First World War in Western Europe was their official status. Both in the Soviet Union and in the Weimar Republic in Germany modernist art was for the first time adopted as part of state-sponsored cultural programs, and given a more privileged position than had ever been accorded modernist culture anywhere in the past.

In neither society, to be sure, was there any lack of opposition, among either artists or politicians, to this elevation of modernism to an official position. In little more than a decade after the avant-garde had been granted special privileges, moreover, it was brutally crushed in both countries for purely political reasons—first in Russia, and then in Germany. Yet during the extraordinary period of its elevation, modernism greatly expanded the reach of its influence. Many of

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the developments that we still regard as the identifying features of the modern movement—geometrical abstraction and Constructivist form in painting and sculpture, the International Style in architecture, and their influence on advertising, publishing, industrial and interior design, and the educational programs essential to their production—were either created or codified in precisely those milieus where the avant-garde was effectively enlisted in the service of socialist programs.

In this history, the Bauhaus has long been acknowledged to have played a major role, and not only for what was original about the Bauhaus itself but also for the way it served as a vehicle for systematizing and transmitting the ideas of other avant-garde movements with which it felt itself to have a close affinity. The extent to which the Bauhaus represented a convergence of avant-garde ideas may be inferred from the following passage in the review of the 1923 Bauhaus Exhibition written by the critic Paul Westheim in the Berlin magazine *Das Kunstblatt*:

> Three days in Weimar and one can never look at a square again for the rest of one's life. Malevich invented the square way back in 1913. How lucky he didn't have his invention patented. The ultimate of Bauhaus ideals: the individual square. Talent is a square, genius an absolute square. The *De Stijl* people have put on a protest exhibition in Jena—they claim to possess the only true square.

Notwithstanding its sarcasm, Westheim's observation was certainly correct in suggesting what the Bauhaus owed to Malevich and his Suprematist circle in Russia as well as to the ideas of the De Stijl group in Holland for certain aspects of its design philosophy. But what the Bauhaus owed to Malevich and De Stijl went far beyond the apotheosis of the square as an ideal form. As originally formulated prior to the creation of the Bauhaus in Weimar, both Suprematism and De Stijl each encompassed a peculiar amalgam of artistic, mystical, and collectivist thought that, with modifications and peculiarities of its own, promptly found a new home at the Bauhaus, too.

Nowadays it tends to be forgotten—especially in this country, where its philosophy of design and design education has exerted such an enormous influence—that the Bauhaus was similarly shaped by an exotic menu of beliefs, superstitions, and ideologies. On the one hand, there was a mixture of aestheticism, mysticism, and socialism that paralleled that of Suprematism and De Stijl, while on the other hand, there were also attempts made to accommodate the imperatives of modern industry, capitalist enterprise, private patronage, and even, at times, German racial theory. At one time or another in its fourteen-year history (1919–1933), the Bauhaus was also riven by fundamental conflicts that were never resolved. Opposition between partisans of handicraft and partisans of the machine remained rife. So did opposition between proponents of fine art and the champions of applied art, and between those who believed in elite aesthetic standards and those committed to production for the masses. If all of this makes the Bauhaus sound like a maelstrom of intellectual anarchy, political intrigue, and rival fanaticisms, the truth seems to be that it often was. Yet it was also one of the places where the fate of modernist art and architecture as well as much else in modern visual culture was fiercely contested. Even the conflicts that divided certain Bauhaus masters and students against each other became an enduring part of its legacy. They played a large role, for example, in our own art schools and university art departments in the decades following 1933, when remnants of the Bauhaus—now stripped, for the most part, of its politics and mysticism—established themselves as an intellectual force in American cultural life.

Much light is cast upon the history of the Bauhaus and the conflicts that defined its character by the large documentary volume that Frank Whitford has now brought out under the title *The Bauhaus: Masters and*

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Students by Themselves.[1] Mr. Whitford is a British writer who specializes in modern German and Austrian art, and his new book is a companion to the excellent short history of the Bauhaus he published ten years ago. That book, which is still in print, remains the best introduction to the subject in English.[2] The new book is, in effect, an overscale expansion of the abbreviated "Documents" section in the earlier book, and is valuable for its illustrations as well as for its translated texts.

From both the texts and the illustrations it is possible to follow this sometimes bizarre history from the inside, so to speak, in the reactions and initiatives of its participants. As a result, our understanding of the paradoxes and outright contradictions that plagued the Bauhaus is much enhanced. If the whole subject cannot be said to be completely demystified, it is largely because of the many mystifications to be found at the very core of the Bauhaus idea.

This menu of mystifications was very much present in the Manifesto with which Walter Gropius launched the Bauhaus in April 1919. Gropius called for a collectivist conception of art and architecture that would "combine everything—architecture *and* sculpture *and* painting—in a *single form* which will one day rise towards the heavens from the hands of a million workers as the crystalline symbol of a new and coming faith." He was thus proposing a program that was utopian in spirit ("a new and coming faith") and made its obeisances to proletarian revolution (those "million workers"), while at the same time attacking bourgeois taste (dismissed in the Manifesto as "salon art") and invoking a social philosophy of art akin to that of John Ruskin and William Morris ("Let us . . . create a *new guild of craftsmen* without the class distinctions that raise an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist," etc.).

Except for the priority that Gropius gave to architecture, it was a manifesto more reminiscent of the prewar Expressionist movement than indicative of the kind of Constructivist modernism we associate with the Bauhaus of the 1920s. In keeping with this prewar spirit, the Manifesto's cover illustration was a woodcut by Lyonel Feininger of a Gothic cathedral rendered in a graphic style that combined semi-abstract Cubist forms with a distinctly Expressionist rather than Constructivist manner. That the medieval cathedral was drafted into service as a symbol for the Bauhaus was only one of the many historical oddities attending its inception, and it caused the school some trouble when the Bauhaus came to be dubbed "the Cathedral of Socialism." This was the term used by Oskar Schlemmer in his Manifesto for the 1923 Bauhaus Exhibition, the show that Paul Westheim reviewed in the passage quoted above. The opening words of Schlemmer's Manifesto were imbued with even more political passion than Gropius's inaugural statement—

> The State Bauhaus, founded after the catastrophe of the war, in the chaos of revolution and at a time when art was explosive and laden with pathos, will first become the rallying-point for those who, believing in the future and storming the gates of Heaven, wish to build the Cathedral of Socialism.

—but the political situation in Weimar was already so volatile that this manifesto, which also echoed Nietzsche in its declaration that "God is dead," had to be immediately withdrawn because of its open avowal of atheistic socialism.

By 1923, moreover, another development had made it politically advisable for the Bauhaus to soften its socialist orientation, and that was its need to attract entrepreneurial support. It was urgently in need of access to commercial markets for the kind of design objects and design projects that were being created under its auspices. Technology

1 *The Bauhaus: Masters and Students by Themselves*, edited by Frank Whitford with additional research by Julia Engelhardt; The Overlook Press, 328 pages, $85.

2 *Bauhaus*, by Frank Whitford (Thames & Hudson, 1984).

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was now to be the keynote, with the promise of production based, as one of the Bauhaus's fund-raising appeals put it, on "the fusion of the artist with the technician and artisan." This appeal, by the way, was addressed by the masters and students of the Bauhaus in 1923 to a group of celebrated American capitalists—Henry Ford and William Randolph Hearst, among them—and it is interesting to recall the political note that was deemed to be most appropriate in approaching such figures: "We make our appeal to yourself [sic], who have the privilege of living in the Land whose population is today in the act of taking the reins of the Leadership of the White Race into its grasp." This was exactly ten years before Hitler made a similar appeal for racial leadership as Chancellor of Germany. It was indeed a strange ideological stew that nourished the Bauhaus's incursion into the world of modernist art and design.

What, then, was the fate of pure art at the Bauhaus—of art, that is, which is not created for practical use? It is one of the paradoxes of the Bauhaus's reputation that while its name has become permanently associated with modernist painting, the two most illustrious painters who served on its teaching staff—Paul Klee and Vasily Kandinsky—were not allowed to offer instruction in this art until Gropius, the founding director, had resigned and the future of the school was thrown into doubt. It is a further paradox that Gropius's successor, Hannes Meyer, the architect who was selected for the post after Mies van der Rohe turned it down, was adamantly opposed to the kind of abstract art Klee and Kandinsky were creating. Meyer was a firebrand Marxist in the Soviet mode. (When Meyer himself was dumped in what Mr. Whitford describes as "a classic coup"—it was accomplished while he was on vacation—he moved to the Soviet Union, where, he claimed at the time, "a truly proletarian culture is being forged, where socialism is coming into being, where that society already exists for which we here in capitalism have been fighting.") Yet it was under this Communist fanatic, who took over the Bauhaus in 1927, that Klee and Kandinsky were first allowed to offer painting classes as part of the regular school curriculum.

The painting classes didn't survive for very long, of course. Politics, not art, was Hannes Meyer's driving interest. Political courses were now for the first time made a mandatory part of the Bauhaus curriculum, and everything was given a sociological slant. Meyer even established a Communist cell in the school. As Mr. Whitford writes, "Unlike Gropius, Meyer was not prepared to trim his sails to the wind in the interests of the school's survival." But then, Meyer had never really believed in the school. In 1930, after he was kicked out, he wrote an open letter to the mayor of Dessau, to which the Bauhaus had moved in 1925, which was even more sardonic about the school's basic philosophy of design than Paul Westheim's review of the 1923 Bauhaus Exhibition.

> Incestuous theories [wrote Meyer] barred every approach to design that was appropriate for life: the cube was trumps and its sides were yellow, red, blue, white, gray, black. This Bauhaus cube was given to the child to play with and to the Bauhaus snob as a knick-knack. The square was red. The circle was blue. The triangle was yellow. One sat and slept on the colored geometry of the furniture. One lived in the colored sculptures of the houses. As carpets on the floors lay the psychological complexes of young girls. Everywhere art strangled life. Thus my tragicomic situation came about: as head of the Bauhaus I was opposed to the Bauhaus style.

Upon Meyer's appointment to head the Bauhaus, the school lost some of its most eminent talents. László Moholy-Nagy, himself a veteran of Bela Kun's Hungarian Soviet but now more interested in modernist art than in Communist ideology, promptly resigned, and so did Marcel Breuer and Herbert Bayer. Even Oskar Schlemmer, once he saw what "the Cathedral of Socialism" would really look like under the regime of a true believer like Meyer, got out. Klee

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remained until the appointment of Mies van der Rohe as Meyer's successor, and then he left, too. But Mies, however he differed with Meyer about politics, was not hospitable to the art of painting, either. Thus, as Mr. Whitford writes, "Kandinsky had little to do, since the few fine art courses were now eliminated, and in 1932 he was still arguing with Mies about the cuts made to his teaching." The art of painting was virtually an underground activity at the Bauhaus, as one observer quoted by Mr. Whitford—the writer Ernst Kallai—made clear in 1930:

> Whoever glanced into the studios and rooms of the Bauhausler at night was amazed by the many painters who were standing here and there at their easels, brushing away at their canvases—a few only in secret, like schoolboys secretly writing poetry, perhaps with a bad conscience, because they were not brooding over modern functional buildings, collapsible chairs or lamps.

The fate of art in this "Cathedral of Socialism" had been effectively determined from the outset by Gropius's original program for the Bauhaus. Most of the students who had responded to Gropius's promise of "an art education based on collaborative workshop-training," as Mr. Whitford writes, "had enrolled in the hope that they would eventually become painters or sculptors, and were therefore dismayed not only by the lack of space and materials but also by the minimal attention to fine art in the curriculum." Yet of the nine men whom Gropius appointed between 1919 and 1924 as "masters of form" (as the senior faculty was called), eight were painters, who were summoned to teach the fundamentals of design but not painting itself. Gropius himself had a deep aversion to easel painting, and seems never to have altered his view of it.

To understand what was propagated at the Bauhaus in lieu of fine art, we are obliged to examine the mystical origins of the *Vorkurs*, or preliminary course, which was fundamental to the whole Bauhaus program—and which, not incidentally, became the Bauhaus's principal legacy to American art education. Here the key figure was the Swiss artist, mystic, and theoretician Johannes Itten—"a man of strange beliefs," as Mr. Whitford writes, "a teacher of unconventional brilliance and a perplexing mixture of saint and charlatan." He seems to have been appointed to the Bauhaus largely on the basis of a recommendation from Alma Mahler, who was then married to Gropius and who had met Itten in Vienna.

It was Itten who brought geometric form to the Bauhaus. He also brought a good deal of color theory to its use, and Itten's theories of form and color became the core of the *Vorkurs*. But he also brought a good deal else. Above all, he brought an all-encompassing mystical faith called Mazdaznan, which was derived from Zoroastrianism. This, according to Mr. Whitford, was "the creation of a German-American typographer who had given himself the name Dr. O. Z. (for Zarathustra) A. Ha'nish."

> Mazdaznan [Mr. Whitford writes] saw the world as a battlefield on which evil continuously challenges good for supremacy. . . . Mazdaznan also held that what is commonly construed as reality is no more than a veil obscuring a higher and more authentic existence. In order to make the mind and body receptive to the true reality, Mazdaznan prescribed a program of physical and mental exercises, a rigorous vegetarian diet and regular purification of the system by means of fasting and enemas.

Now Itten was scarcely alone among the first generation of abstract artists in his mystical beliefs. Mondrian, Kandinsky, Malevich, and many of their close associates were also staunch believers in one or another form of the occult, and their beliefs played a central role in the creation of abstract art. But even among the mystics of that artistic generation, Itten was something special. For one thing, he dressed for the role, sporting a shaved head and a robe of his own design. And for another, his method of instruction was essentially religious in character—in ef-

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fect, a campaign for the soul of those chosen for conversion.

> Its critics [writes Mr. Whitford] have seen the *Vorkurs* as a kind of brain-washing in which everything students had previously learned was drummed out of them and they were made receptive to new ideas and methods. Its apologists prefer to see the primary aim of the preliminary course as the liberation of the creative potential dormant within each student.
>
> Two of Itten's exercises were especially important. The first required students to play with various textures, forms, colors and tones in both two and three dimensions. The second demanded the analysis of works of art in terms of rhythmic lines which were meant to capture the spirit, the expressive content of the original. Before attempting such exercises the students were asked to limber up their bodies and minds by physical jerks, controlled breathing and meditation.

This was the *Vorkurs* to which talents like Klee and Kandinsky were asked to limit their teaching for much of their time at the Bauhaus, and it was something of a miracle that they were able to make of it as much as they did.

Itten clearly represented a view of art and a view of the world far removed from that of a materialist radical like Hannes Meyer, yet it was between these extremes of a mystical formalism and a socialist utilitarianism that the students at the Bauhaus were obliged to negotiate their course. It is little wonder, then, that the fate of fine art was left to shift for itself—an enterprise effectively orphaned in the presence of so much superior talent. What the Bauhaus contributed to the future was, in the end, mainly a modern line of consumer goods, industrial design, graphic styles appropriate to capitalist commerce, and a mode of commercial architecture that required a mercantile culture like America's to be fully realized. From the tradition of modernist art the Bauhaus took much, but in the final reckoning it contributed remarkably little to the mainstream achievements of modernist art. Klee, Kandinsky, and Feininger were all mature artists when they came to the Bauhaus, and in the cases of Klee and Kandinsky, their most distinct debt to the Bauhaus is to be found in the theoretical writings in the Twenties, which grew out of their teaching of the *Vorkurs*, not in their painting. Schlemmer remained a minor figure for whom as a painter the Bauhaus was more a subject than an aesthetic, and Josef Albers did not really mature as a painter until he emigrated to the United States. For all practical purposes, the pursuit of painting as an art remained a fugitive enterprise at the Bauhaus. That, I suppose, is the most fundamental of the many paradoxes that define its history.

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The fallen world of Geoffrey Hill

by William Logan

The poet's dilemma in a fallen world is not how far he has fallen, but how little ground he has regained. Crabbed, clenched, intransigent, the words plain but the language tangled: the inconvenience of a poetry as difficult as Geoffrey Hill's is that it demands more than readers are usually willing to lose, at least to the trivial "art" of reading. If Hill's work makes most contemporary poetry appear trivial, contemporary poetry makes Hill's appear stilted, clotted (even gelatinous), deep in confusion and the calculus of decay.

Our poetry has long been at the mercy of its prose. Hill argues for a poetry secure in its doubts, wretched in its responsibilities, devilish or bedeviled in its labors. His works, previously published in five books and now gathered in his *New and Collected Poems*,[1] form an achievement remarkably rich but remarkably narrow in its numbers: two longish poems and some seventy short poems and sequences. He might be compared to Eliot, a poet of more complex despairs and more common joys, in the asperity of his production (when poets' lives were shorter their works were longer). As with other poets of rapture and self-loathing, the case against Hill has little to do with the dislike his poetry arouses, though that dislike has often schooled his critics in intemperance ("kitsch feudalism. . . . a grisly historical voyeurism . . . both insular and complacent"). It is a case intimate with the difficulty of the poetry itself.

Consider the telling grandeurs and tolling gradations of a poem as early as "Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings":

> For whom the possessed sea littered, on both shores,
> Ruinous arms; being fired, and for good,
> To sound the constitution of just wars,
> Men, in their eloquent fashion, understood.

Hardly a phrase fails to quarrel with its colloquial fiction, hardly a noun or adjective or verb steels itself against the infection of second meaning. The war is the Hundred Years War, whose staggering cost in men and materiel gave no profit to England or France. The sea may be a king's mere property, his possession by force of arms; but the tides are never subject to noblesse oblige, and the sea may rise and destroy as if demonically possessed. "Ruinous" is a famous mirrored word, silvering now toward the destructive and disastrous, now toward what has fallen to ruin. Those arms, both ruined and ruining (we should perhaps remember the etymological root in fall and collapse), may be steel helmets and swords littering the beaches, or the hacked limbs of fallen soldiers. What is done "for good" is not always "done for good."

The compression of such language answers no intensity of circumstance—this is,

1 *New and Collected Poems, 1952–1992*, by Geoffrey Hill; Houghton Mifflin, 228 pages, $29.95; $17.95 paper.

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after all, a requiem. It responds to anger at the futility of such loss, for which language, however compacted, can offer no gain. But the angers must still scruple at the difficulties of language, of *interpretation*, on which wars are founded: words may mean quite different things "on both shores," and the poem disturbs by its troubled compression our easy compassion for one side or another, or for soldier against king. Whether these are *just* wars or just *wars*, the dead are just as dead.

> Knowing the dead, and how some are
> disposed:
> Subdued under rubble, water, in sand graves,
> In clenched cinders not yielding their abused
> Bodies and bonds to those whom war's chance
> saves
> Without the law: we grasp, roughly, the song.
> ("Two Formal Elegies")

The dead are the common property of Hill's early verse, and his first book, *For the Unfallen* (1959), is itself a dark sounding of the teary inversions and lying solemnities of Laurence Binyon's anthology piece, "For the Fallen" ("They went with songs to the battle, they were young,/ Straight of limb, true of eye"). Under Hill's hard scrutiny, poems for the dead are always for the living. Such recognition may recommend no ease or pleasure in the condition of speech, and the harshness and marmoreal coldness of Hill's early work may be plundered by the critic in a way that seems chilling to the reader: Hill seems gripped by a mortuary lust. The first book, within its sweetly bitter ironies, has a number of thwarted love poems worked out in terms scarcely different from the battles and alarums:

> By such rites they saved love's face, and such
> laws
> As prescribe mutual tolerance, charity
> To neighbours, strangers, those by nature
> Subdued among famines and difficult wars.

This was called "The Troublesome Reign." Thereafter love, unless sanctioned as "divine," unless sainted in religious trapping, almost never returns to his work (except in deadly guise: "An owl plunges to its tryst/ With a field-mouse").

The complex guilts of Hill's poetry are keenly judicial, and the judgments in language are also the judgments of history and religion, of the gas chamber and the cross. That poetry, the most narrowly formed and most thinly and invariantly proposed of the major work of our late century, might be construed as a search for adequate authority, a search deviled by a skeptical mistrust of the common palliations of government, of religious practice, of language. The poetry attempts, in lonely and resistant fashion, to oppose their emollient nature, without being immune to their lure or unaware of the self-deceptions that afflict such a venture. The fable that informs his second book, *King Log* (1968), warns not just against the wish for such authority, but against the divine spirit who treats lowly creation with such cruel mockery. Dissatisfied with the log Zeus sent them when they asked for a king, Aesop's frogs were even more unhappy with the ravenous stork that replaced it. A poet who both desires and distrusts authority, a poet of uncertain belief, should be wary of such morals.

> I love my work and my children. God
> Is distant, difficult. Things happen.
> Too near the ancient troughs of blood
> Innocence is no earthly weapon.
>
> I have learned one thing: not to look down
> So much upon the damned. They, in their
> sphere,
> Harmonize strangely with the divine
> Love. I, in mine, celebrate the love-choir.

Apart from an epigraph from the *Amores*, that is the whole of "Ovid in the Third Reich." We do not know what Ovid saw or did at the court of Augustus that required his banishment to the Black Sea, nor do we know what he might have observed at the court of Hitler. His terrible punishment (to

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be removed from the sources of pleasure in his life, to be removed from his own language) and his abject and fruitless apologies make him a compelling symbol of the bitter fate that awaits poetic witness, however "innocent." Those "ancient troughs of blood" recall the blood that gutters after battle, the blood guttering from ritual sacrifice, but also the blood-filled trench at which the hungry ghosts came to feed in the *Odyssey*. The sacrificial in Hill's poetry summons the dead in like fashion. (The gods also want "gobbets of the sweetest sacrifice," and surprisingly often in Hill's work flesh is rendered disturbingly in terms of food.)

King Log is haunted by civil and uncivil wars, and most terribly by the War of the Roses. "Funeral Music," the sonnet sequence dedicated to three of the noble and ignoble dead of those wars, is central to an achievement where blood sacrifices are never far from failures of government (both civil and personal), and are often potent in the misplaced faiths religion sets one against another. Hill has registered his ambition in this sequence for "a florid grim music broken by grunts and shrieks," which might serve as a satanic description of the liturgy.

> They bespoke doomsday and they meant it by
> God, their curved metal rimming the low
> ridge.
> But few appearances are like this. Once
> Every five hundred years a comet's
> Over-riding stillness might reveal men
> In such array, livid and featureless,
> With England crouched beastwise beneath it
> all.
> 'Oh, that old northern business . . .' A field
> After battle utters its own sound
> Which is like nothing on earth, but is earth.
> Blindly the questing snail, vulnerable
> Mole emerge, blindly we lie down, blindly
> Among carnage the most delicate souls
> Tup in their marriage-blood, gasping 'Jesus'.

This is the Battle of Towton, Palm Sunday, 1461, and Hill is minding fatalities more than facts. The sonnets have been hacked clean of rhyme, metrical favor, anything but the beastlike music of noun and adjective, two-faced ambiguity (*bespoke* also means *custom-made*) and cunning enjambment. The blood of battle and the blood of the marriage bed are set at one, and the gasp of the death throes is one with the gasp of orgasm, both taking in vain (and taking vainly) the name of the Lord, from whom descends all possibility of resurrection.

Critics who would pigeonhole Hill all too conveniently as a conservative fail to understand the radical nature of his mistrusts, from which no complacent sentence is safe. All speech is unfaithful in its faiths. These early books are perhaps too giddily satisfied with the demands of rhetoric (a rhetoric calculated to make the reader feel unworthy of it), the forced phrases and hot solemnities all too reminiscent of the religiose high-mindedness of Allen Tate. Hill's childhood Christianity finds an austere outlet in his monkish faith in the phrase, the squalor of the said, the poet having fled the trappings, but never the traumas, of the religious urge. The thickened lines of Tate and the young Robert Lowell have the same soaked intensity that Hill labored to achieve (by influence, not indenture); and having achieved such brooding morality, he might have continued to offer, like his older contemporary Anthony Hecht (for whom the moral sources were Jewish, not Church of England), darker and darker variations in the secular shudder of religious guilt.

The discordant prose musics of *King Log* were shortly followed, however, by a sequence of prose poems at times agleam with wit. (Though he could have been a song-and-dance ghoul, who would have thought Hill could be funny?) Without sacrificing the fastidiousness or ore-bearing density of his language, the thirty poems of *Mercian Hymns* (1971) put that language in service to an idea beyond moody requiem. The hymns are sung for, by, on behalf of Offa, the eighth-century ruler of the kingdom of Mercia, a figure whose achievements in coinage and brutal political union continue to preside over notions of Britain as a na-

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tion-state. Hill's Offa, however, lives into the present, a king of such gravity that time distorts around him: as Hill noted, this Offa "might . . . be regarded as the presiding genius of the West Midlands, his dominion enduring from the middle of the eighth century until the middle of the twentieth."

> King of the perennial holly-groves, the riven sandstone: overlord of the M5: architect of the historic rampart and ditch, the citadel at Tamworth, the summer hermitage in Holy Cross: guardian of the Welsh Bridge and the Iron Bridge: contractor to the desirable new estates: saltmaster: money-changer: commissioner for oaths: martyrologist: the friend of Charlemagne.
>
> 'I liked that,' said Offa, 'sing it again.'

The sudden, baffled displacements of this history betray the narrow respect for force and influence mere chronology has. History is no neat laying down of sediments: we fail to understand the deep or abiding authority of an Offa if we do not see where the past still afflicts the present, not least in the perennial holly-groves (symbol of winter rebirth for pagans and Christians both). Offa has his thumb in every pie (the editors of the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* further swelled his powers by annotating the M5, not as the main highway through the Midlands, but as a branch of British Intelligence —they were of course thinking of MI5). The complicities of the past with the present are not always immune to a downward spiral into sentiment and vulgarity, and the remains of the past often produce a mere fiction of the flesh of the past.

> On the morning of the crowning we chorused our remission from school. It was like Easter: hankies and gift-mugs approved by his foreign gaze, the village-lintels curlered with paper flags.
>
> We gaped at the car-park of 'The Stag's Head' where a bonfire of beer-crates and holly-boughs whistled above the tar. And the chef stood there, a king in his new-risen hat, sealing his brisk largesse with 'any mustard?'

The chef in his silly "new-risen hat" (white like risen dough, but also new-risen like Christ at Easter) reminds us that any man might be king, if the domain is small enough, though his kingly largesse may be reduced to sausages. Hill is keenly aware that in their fallen graces these "hymns" are to a lord secular, not spiritual. The wryness of this impiety, and the attendant commercial kitsch of "hankies and gift-mugs," honor the throne they impoverish. Majesty is also outward show, and without inner substance only a tarnished show. The pomp and circumstance of royal investiture in Britain is a late Victorian invention: as the throne contracts, the need for empty display expands.

Into this welter, whose vulgarities are still heir to the richness of the past, is inserted the hobbled autobiography of the child Hill: "Dreamy, smug-faced, sick on outings—I who was taken to be a king of some kind, a prodigy, a maimed one." The child acts out dreams of kingship (dreams alluring to a child later tormented by rituals and sacrifices, and ritual sacrifice), and often retreats, "calm and alone, in his private derelict sandlorry named *Albion*." The childhood loneliness is at once ripe and wretched ("my rich and desolate childhood"), a shadow over the loneliness of the throne, which reveals some of the complex sources of Hill's poetic language. The wreckage of the truck bears, with a certain mercilessness, the ancient name of Britain, now derelict itself.

In *Mercian Hymns* Hill sacrificed the proud aloofness of his verse, its pure and chilly witness, for a private recital of those betrayals with which history cooperates and toward which history tends. It is difficult to understand modern England without knowing where it has been irrigated in ancient blood. The damaged ghosts of his past violated the antique boundaries of his verse; and if his poetry has never again risked such half-embarrassed, half-guilty intimicies, it has never again been as moving or appealing.

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The sonnets and devotional songs of *Tenebrae* (1978) are a mysterious coda to the themes of national decay and private despair in *Mercian Hymns*. Hill has always been hesitant (even hedging) in declaring his religious conviction: the three religious sequences in *Tenebrae* are cast in idioms of the counterfeit antique, of chemical patina applied like paste. They are repellent alike in their self-lacerating unworthiness and their eyes-lifted piety. Our late century has not discovered its religious idiom; neither is it likely to embrace one formed like this:

> As he is wounded
> I am hurt
> he bleeds from pride
> I from my heart
>
> as he is dying
> I shall live
> in grief desiring
> still to grieve
> ("The Pentecost Castle")

Hill's sources, in Spanish lyrics of the Counter-Reformation, mix the sexual and the spiritual; but not even a church that has given its choirs up for guitars would find these the lyrics of its dogma or its doubt.

Even in the seven sonnets of "Lachrimae," where Hill's language returns to its cold depths and contortions, the religious despair is curiously hollow and unconvincing (the multiplication of the loaves and the abstractions), as if spurred to intensities beyond the idiom's belief in itself:

> Crucified Lord, however much I burn
> to be enamoured of your paradise,
> knowing what ceases and what will not cease,
> frightened of hell, not knowing where to turn,
>
> I fall between harsh grace and hurtful scorn.
> You are the crucified who crucifies,
> self-withdrawn even from your own device,
> your trim-plugged body, wreath of rakish thorn.

The "rakish thorn" and "trim-plugged body" restore, however briefly, a language of sardonic observation, but the rest sounds like a corpse trying to mouth the collected religious canticles of Eliot.

What salvages a book of despairing secrecy and incontinent satisfactions is a series of sonnets on the underkingdom of English landscape, "An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England." The title is grotesque and disfiguring, a further sign of the decline into pomposity; but not since the over-ripeness of Tennyson has anyone rendered so feverishly the doomed grandeurs of English nature.

> The pigeon purrs in the wood; the wood has gone;
> dark leaves that flick to silver in the gust,
> and the marsh-orchids and the heron's nest,
> goldgrimy shafts and pillars of the sun.
>
> Weightless magnificence upholds the past.
> Cement recesses smell of fur and bone
> and berries wrinkle in the badger-run
> and wiry heath-fern scatters its fresh rust.
>
> 'O clap your hands' so that the dove takes flight,
> bursts through the leaves with an untidy sound,
> plunges its wings into the green twilight
>
> above this long-sought and forsaken ground,
> the half-built ruins of the new estate,
> warheads of mushrooms round the filter-pond.

Hill has been roundly reproved for nostalgic complacency in these poems. The English landscape inspires something like the religious passion missing elsewhere, and the longing is so rich in its returns that it is easy to miss the quarrels and doubts that hedge such lushness. If he has partially succumbed to the hypnotizing glory of the past, he has provided warning against such temptations and the meat of a criticism (he posts his warning by subjecting the reader to his temptations). The mushrooms are not nec-

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essarily dangerous, but our nuclear world has given Hill a dangerous image; and to the extent that we must think of the former in terms of the latter we have forever lost our innocence.

One may be of two minds about Hill, but then one may be of two minds about Paradise. He has the valor of his limitations, though some might call it the cowardice of his securities. Hill's themes have been constant (the infection of ancient bloods, abiding afflictions in the affections of landscape, the moral responsibilities of language, unworthiness before grace), but his attentions unpredictable. He has forced the marginal into our modes of attention, at the risk of seeming bizarre or merely idiosyncratic, and therefore a figure of margins himself. The subject of *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (1983) is a French Catholic socialist, deeply (and perhaps bloodily) embroiled in Parisian politics before the First World War. He was a beetroot nationalist, poet and magazine editor, the intellectual son of peasants, and died leading troops through a beetroot field in the Battle of the Marne. Here and elsewhere this new edition has destructively discarded many of Hill's original notes, without which his poems are even more inscrutable; there he disclosed the attractions in this lonely and unattractive figure, "self-excommunicate but adoring," who despite his estrangement from the Church made two pilgrimages to Chartres. Hill has made such pilgrimages himself.

Péguy begins with the assassination of Jean Jaurès, the socialist deputy who had been subject to Péguy's admiration, then his attack. Péguy had called for his blood in metaphorical terms, and a young madman had obliged by shooting Jaurès through the head.

> Crack of a starting-pistol. Jean Jaurès
> dies in a wine-puddle. Who or what stares
> through the café-window crêped in powder-
> smoke?
> The bill for the new farce reads *Sleepers Awake*.
> History commands the stage wielding a toy
> gun,
> rehearsing another scene. It has raged so
> before,
> countless times; and will do, countless times
> more,
> in the guise of supreme clown, dire tragedian.
>
> In Brutus' name martyr and mountebank
> ghost Caesar's ghost, his wounds of air and ink
> painlessly spouting. Jaurès' blood lies stiff
> on menu-card, shirt-front and handkerchief.
>
> Did Péguy kill Jaurès? Did he incite
> the assassin? Must men stand by what they
> write
> as by their camp-beds or their weaponry
> or shell-shocked comrades while they sag and
> cry?

Such questions afflict a poet anxious that his words be more than gestures, worrying the responsibilities a poet takes on when he descends to the word. The language here responds to the cunning and stealth by which words keep their promises: the war has its aspect of farce, an ironically named *Sleepers Awake*, a matter of stage blood and stage villainy. The deaths are real, nevertheless, and the poetry keeps faith by breaking faith with the simply plain-spoken: matters spoken are never so plain.

The hundred quatrains of *Péguy*, in the brilliant, battered guile of half-rhyme and harsh pentameter, wind through questions of honor and repentance, and the root nationalisms of "militant-pastoral" France, in a profound meditation on faith and the artist's responsibility. The most striking and demanding long poem in English after *Four Quartets*, it suffers its unsympathetic subject (even Péguy's poetry was absurd in its droning repetitions) with a duty bordering on complacent nobility. A style itself so guilty of chilling ironies and cast-iron wit (what would Hill's light verse be like—"Beelzebub, the Mystery God"?) is not likely to be accorded praise equal to its brilliance. That is itself an irony that would not escape a poet who often courts dislike with his

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despair. In such a book his varying powers have been drawn into new kinship, instead of being cousins squabbling with one another over an old patch of ground.

Hill has an intelligence crippled by religious passion and goaded by lack of faith toward greater ecstasies in the only medium that can serve as the conduit of his trust: his language. One is surprised not to find him drawn to the mysticism and misanthropy of some of the Counter-Enlightenment figures ably studied by Isaiah Berlin: Hamann, Herder, Vico, de Maistre. The British critics —most of them—have always admired Hill, though the admiration has sometimes been molded in terms of disapproval (the disapproval of other critics has been molded in outright rage). Good poetry is rarely so unremittingly serious, and the style has usually broken (the lapses into self-parody are like smashed china) when it could not be bent. The great English love affair with Larkin (a silver cup only a little dented by the slanders and self-hatreds of the letters, the pornography of the life) is almost entirely a love of style, and of the character that style creates. The secret sharings of these otherwise antagonistic talents and opposing spirits include the love of English landscape, the hauntings of religion and religious places, the abiding in tradition, the self-loathing, the loneliness, the fear of death. They are used by their materials to different ends (and with different impurities), but not with different integrities. Had Hill been more affectionately regarded in Britain, he might not have spent the last half-dozen years teaching in the Department of Religion at Boston University. For a poet of such wary religious instincts, this is one further irony the age has demanded. The age is not yet ready to understand Hill in religious terms, and perhaps will not be until religion has been understood in Hill's terms.

The thirteen new poems in the *New and Collected* are ghostly, even ghastly, reminders of former themes, elegiac in tone, many of them memorials for figures public and private. Hill's muscled lines have been wasted with diet, and a few of the poems are inconsequential or indistinct (though the otherwise unmemorable "To the Nieuport Scout" may illuminate the incident of the lost biplane in *Mercian Hymns*). In "Cycle," for William Arrowsmith, the words have been splashed on the page like paint, or spilled like fallen leaves:

> So there there it is past
> reason and measure
> sustaining
> the constancy of mischance
> its occlusion
> a spasm
> a psalm

Something imaginative has been foreclosed in such poems: they reek of a locked church.

A poet must be allowed something for his wintry beauty, and Hill's sequences for Aleksandr Blok and for Churchill have a frozen reverence, moving in its damnations as well as the pinched salvations of its language:

> The brazed city
> reorders its own
> destruction, admits
> the strutting lords
>
> to the temple,
> vandals of sprayed blood
> and oblivion
> to make their mark.
>
> The spouting head
> spiked as prophetic
> is ancient news.
> Once more the keeper
>
> of the dung-gate
> tells his own story;
> so too the harlot
> of many tears.
> ("Churchill's Funeral")

Here the poet has glimpsed savage possibility in the short line, tense with its clattering ambiguities ("The spouting head/

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spiked" might be a headline or a newspaper columnist, as well as the head of the prophet). No poet since Pound in "Mauberly" has packed short lines with such guarded weight or intonation. Nevertheless, the implication of these brief or broken lines is that the weight of speech has become an almost intolerable burden, that the words have begun to collapse in upon themselves. The poet of such broodings must feel the kinship with Beckett that these expressive inexpressions morosely claim.

Hill has been an uncomfortable figure for contemporary poetry, resistant to the blandishments of "emotion" or appeal, proud in his lonely dignities as well as his reserves. His two books of criticism, *The Lords of Limit* (1984) and *The Enemy's Country* (1991), are among the most painstaking, brilliant, and claustrophobic analyses of literature in our century, and have expanded on his concern for the guilts and guiles of language and the moral recognitions of the word. Hill's proud solitude and self-contempt have been subject to the poetry rather than subject of the poetry, in the current fashion (poets with standards make poets without them profoundly nervous). His style has been an outrage upon the glib decencies of recent verse. For this he has risked condemnation for a cold-blooded, reptilian manner—a style like "fatted marble," to use one of his phrases—and the suspicion that he has aggrandized his guilts, that (like the reactionary poseur Mishima) he has poked the arrows of St. Sebastian into his own flesh. He is the last man in poetry to wear wig and breeches.

Poets have so lost the respect of the audience they once labored to please—the ordinary half-educated reader (most poets are themselves half-educated, and not unappealingly so)—that it is worth asking, not whether poets are any longer worthy of their audience, but whether that audience is any longer worthy of poets like Hill. Should poets continue to stumble down the levels of prose until they are speaking the language of the worm and the toad (or, to be fair, a language not even worthy of worms and toads), or should they bear a language in the burden of its saying, a language where the force of words is the trust that language demands? Asking this, in his skepticism, eloquence, and power, Hill is as good as his word.

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Degas & his landscapes

by Karen Wilkin

Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas (1834–1917) has been called "the most misunderstood of famous modern artists." He is at once utterly familiar and remarkably enigmatic. Popularly labeled "the Impressionist who painted ballet dancers," he is, in fact, far more than that—a tough, complex, unpredictable artist who is difficult to categorize. A brilliant draftsman, with an unerring grasp of eloquent contour and telling interval, he possessed one of the most acute, pitiless eyes in the history of French painting; only Chardin and Matisse seem comparable. But Degas was also fascinated by the ephemeral, the incomplete, and the transient, and (as with Chardin and Matisse) his desire for optical truth—which is not the same as verisimilitude—was filtered through a powerful sense of abstract structure and willed harmony, so much so that it's even arguable whether Degas was an Impressionist at all, despite his close association with the artists who came to be known by that name. The closer we look, the more elusive he seems. There's always something new to discover about Degas's art, but the more we know, the more various and full of contradictions it appears to be and the less we are able to pin down its author.

Hailed today as a radical innovator, a pioneer modernist, Degas was a lifelong admirer of the conservative Ingres and was profoundly attracted to both the clarity of Neo-Classicism and the formal certainties of the Academy. In an era when ambitious painters struggled to produce monumental canvases designed to attract attention at the Salons, the no less ambitious Degas concentrated on intimate-scale paintings and an extraordinary body of work on paper—drawings, pastels, and monotypes—as serious and inventive, if not more so, as anything he did on canvas. Praised as a master of two dimensions, as an original colorist and an accomplished draftsman, he modeled some of the most provocative sculptures in the history of modernist art, devoting a great deal of time, energy, and effort to his idiosyncratic waxes but never casting them and exhibiting only one in his lifetime. Perceived as a cranky bachelor who had few friends, went out rarely, and tolerated few visitors in the studio, Degas painted portraits notable for their sympathy and psychological penetration. Commonly held to be deeply misogynistic, he yet produced astonishingly transparent images of women in unguarded moments—bathing, dressing, working, going about the everyday business of their lives—apparently unaware of being observed. And so on.

The comprehensive 1988 retrospective that traveled to Paris, Ottawa, and New York brought home to us the breadth, ambition, and sheer wide-rangingness of Degas's art and made its inherent paradoxes clear. An illuminating, if quirky, show that aimed at presenting this difficult artist whole, it succeeded in giving us a sense not only of the evolution of Degas's concerns but of the

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single-mindedness of his conceptions and the inventiveness of his methods. It was a demanding exhibit that required a good deal of effort from its viewers, since Degas emerged as neither ingratiating nor easy to grasp. Quite the contrary. He appeared as aloof and chameleon-like as ever, although a few things seemed incontrovertible: his unpredictability and the high level of his achievement. It was clear, too, that he was primarily concerned with the figure (which is not to discount the importance of equestrian themes) and that he was a confirmed urbanite. His best and often best-known works revealed him to have been an alert, dispassionate observer of nineteenth-century Parisian life, a kind of *artiste-flâneur* who bore witness to the private and public spectacles of the day: the theater, the opera house, the *café concert*, the racetrack, the boulevard, the rehearsal, the workplace, the boudoir. Baudelaire, I suspect, would have termed Degas a "painter of modern life," which was to say a painter of modern *urban* life, wholly engaged by the phenomena of the city he lived in and its inhabitants. Unlike many of his "fellow" Impressionists, who found endless sources of imagery in the countryside within reach of Paris, Degas concentrated largely on urban interiors, venturing out-of-doors only to go to the racetrack or the café. Or so we thought.

Lately, Degas scholars, poring over the artist's sketchbooks and notebooks, have begun to challenge even these tenuous certainties. The most recent and, in some ways, perhaps the most dramatic manifestation of their efforts is "Degas Landscapes," an elegant, tightly focused exhibition now on view at the Metropolitan Museum.[1] Organized jointly by Colta Ives of the Metropolitan and George Shackelford of the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, the show forcibly alters and enlarges our conception of the artist we thought we had come to know in 1988. Thanks to this enlightening exhibition, and to the exhaustive, definitive study by Richard Kendall that serves as the exhibition catalogue (and which prompted the exhibit in the first place), we'll never think about Degas in the same way again.

The protean painter-draftsman-sculptor who concentrated on figures and the urban scene turns out to have been a keen observer and inspired painter of the natural world throughout his long life as an artist. More remarkable still, Degas's landscapes include some of his most daring, experimental works. As Kendall points out, however, there is no indication that Degas ever thought of himself as a landscape painter. Many of the Impressionists embraced a kind of "vernacular" landscape—as opposed to the Academy-sanctioned classicizing landscape, with its mythological pretensions—as part of their rejection of conventional standards, but Degas remained a dedicated painter of the figure.

It's further evidence of the paradoxical conservatism of this radical artist that he shared the Academic assumption that the figure was an inherently more significant, more worthy subject than any other, which makes the amount of time he devoted to landscape and the excellence of the results even more notable. Not surprisingly, Degas's landscapes are linked to his travels. On the occasions when he left Paris and was separated from his studio, his works in progress, and his models, he turned his omnivorous eye, perhaps for diversion, on his surroundings. Of course, it may have been this slightly throwaway aspect of his landscape themes that allowed Degas to treat them with such a lack of inhibition, but there is ample evidence, too, that he valued even the most rarefied of his landscape pictures and took them seriously as finished works of art.

It's difficult to know what was most star-

1 "Degas Landscapes" opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on January 21 and remains on view through April 3, 1994. It will then travel to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (April 15–July 2, 1994). A companion book, by Richard Kendall, has been published by the Yale University Press in association with the Met and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (312 pages, $55; $35 paper).

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tling about the exhibition at the Met: discovering that Degas made landscapes in the first place or that he continued to do so from his student years until he was in his sixties, coming to terms with the freshness and improvisatory quality of his efforts or with their obscurity. Not that Degas's landscapes were quite as obscure in his lifetime. Unlike the sculptures to which he devoted so much energy, Degas *did* exhibit a sizable group of his landscapes, mostly monotypes reworked with pastel, in his celebrated 1892 showing at the Galerie Durand-Ruel. Admittedly, at the time of the exhibition, Degas's contemporaries are reported to have been amazed to learn that he had made any landscapes at all. He seems to have worked at them almost as secretly as he did his sculptures, which may also help to explain the astonishing freedom with which he approached landscape. Degas's thinking of himself as a painter, rather than as a sculptor, and hence unconstrained by sculptural conventions, was enormously liberating, as was his perhaps cultivated ignorance of basic sculpture technique. At least as a mature artist, he appears to have felt himself similarly unconfined by the conventions of rendering the landscape. None of this, of course, accounts for why this painter of dancers, jockeys, shopgirls, and bathers should have chosen to hang only landscapes in the sole one-man exhibition of his lifetime. That remains surprising enough. That "Degas Landscapes" is the first exhibition since then devoted to this aspect of the painter's work is even more surprising. The daring and intensity of the monotypes make Degas's decision to show only these images in 1892 more understandable; the lack of attention paid to these works, until recently, remains mystifying.

The Metropolitan's installation revolves around the radically simplified, brooding monotypes, partially re-creating the Durand-Ruel showing and including several actually exhibited in 1892. The galleries on either side offer an introduction and a coda to the monotypes. In the first gallery, we are given drawings and watercolors from Degas's youthful trip to Italy, when he visited his father's family in Naples and worked briefly with the Rome Prize winners at the French Academy, along with a group of equestrian landscapes dotted with horses, riders, and the occasional figure, and an impressive series of unpopulated, luminous pastels from his early travels through France. Collectively, they are persuasive evidence of Degas's fundamental and continuing engagement with outdoor themes; individually, there are some wonderful little pictures among them. An apparently straightforward view from Degas's grandfather's house in Naples, *Italian Landscape Seen through an Arch* (oil on paper, 1856, private collection), seems initially to point back to Corot in its solidity and density, but it quickly declares its individuality and audacity. The landscape framed by the arch, far from being the expected pleasing *veduta*, is peculiarly blank: a strip of sky with sunset clouds, a few distant rooftops at the junction of sky and land, and a vast sea of minimally inflected green treetops. While apparently responding to the spectacle before him, the twenty-two-year-old Degas presents us with an emptied-out image that anticipates the boldly cropped figure compositions of his mature years, with their expanses of "empty" space. Equally good, but at the opposite pole, is a spare, immaculate drawing of the *campagna* from the collection of the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, in which carefully rendered buildings, trees, and even an anecdotal ox become mere nodes of incident, wholly subsumed by the vast space of the Roman countryside. By contrast, the small pastels done during an 1869 sojourn in Normandy seem relatively conventional at first acquaintance, but they, too, soon reveal themselves as anything but, in their subtle orchestrations of tone and color, their directness and economy, and their reduction of landscape forms into archetectonic masses.

The final section of the exhibition includes one of the late vivid pastels of Russian dancers, here seen against a schematic meadow, which bears witness to the persistence of landscape as background in Degas's mature years and perhaps will appease those

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disappointed at not finding more familiar imagery throughout the show. More arresting, though, is the selection of fairly large-scale paintings of the village of St. Valéry, in Picardy, where Degas's family regularly spent holidays. They are odd pictures that teeter on the edge of artfulness, with their fragmented drawing and loose patches of subdued color, but the cumulative effect of their twilight palette and their dissection of rural architecture into geometric planes is to give us a glimpse of a new Degas, and to make us think, perhaps for the first time, of his relationship to contemporaries such as Cézanne and Gauguin.

But it's the monotypes and the pastels related to them that are the most compelling, absorbing works in the show. They are extraordinary pictures, so lean and reductive that they hover on the brink of vanishing, like images seen out of the corner of one's eye. In many, we intuit rather than recognize the hills and woods, fields and paths that they allude to. Unlike Degas's earlier landscape images, which seem to be casual records of specific places, the monotypes are like dream images of sites seen once and then transformed by the passage of time and the distortions of memory. For once, unusually good documentation of the process of their making bears out the accuracy of this impression. Georges Jeanniot, a younger artist friend whose home in Burgundy was where Degas made his landscape monotypes in 1890, later recorded his recollections of the visit in *Souvenirs sur Degas*, published in 1933. The rather worshipful memoir is much quoted, but no less informative:

> Once supplied with everything he needed, without waiting, without allowing himself to be distracted from his idea, he started. With his strong but beautifully-shaped fingers, his hand grasped the objects, the tools of his genius, handling them with a strange skill and little by little one could see emerging on the metal surface a small valley, a sky, white houses, fruit trees with black branches, birches and oaks, ruts full of water after the recent downpour, orangey clouds dispersing in an animated sky, above the red and green earth.

Jeanniot comments further that "these lovely things seemed to be created without the slightest effort, as if the model was in front of him," and adds that the sculptor Paul-Albert Bartholomé, who accompanied Degas on the trip from Paris, "could recognize the places they had gone through."

The palette of the monotypes is very much Degas's own, an oddly unlandscape-like range of golden ochres, yellowish greens, browns, and violets that are nonetheless completely convincing as evocations of the out-of-doors. The method, too, is Degas's own: monotype reworked with pastel, a technique he more or less devised for his own needs. He was similarly inventive in his sculpture techniques, but with less happy results: although formally liberating, his mixtures of clay and wax, like his habit of using cork or paper to extend forms, contributed to the deterioration of his figures while they were still in the studio. It is fortunate that Degas employed the monotype technique extensively as a mature painter, as it is more stable than his *ad hoc* sculpture practice. When he used the method to create images of the figure, he generally used the second impression as a "sketch" for pastel, preserving the first pulling as is. In his landscape monotypes, Degas was just as likely to add to both impressions—or neither—and sometimes transformed the second impression to the point of being all but unrecognizable. (Part of the pleasure of the Metropolitan's installation is spotting the "twin" image in the exhibition's handful of pairs.) Monotype must have delighted Degas. It's a slightly unpredictable, fluid method that offers not only a matchless, velvety surface but, because of the process of printing and reversal, the frequent possibility of at least one repetition of the image and an automatic distancing of the artist from his motif. Given Degas's reticence, his fascination with serial images—Monet had nothing on him there—and his appetite for sensual, worked surfaces, monotype must have seemed ideal.

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When applied to the figure, the serial quality of the monotype allowed Degas to repeat poses with variations in the disposition of limbs and in setting; when he applied it to landscape motifs, it allowed him to suggest rather than describe. More important, the pools of thinned-out pigment pressed into the paper allowed him to give free rein to his sense of color. In many of his landscape monotypes of 1890, those pools of color remain very much pools of color, at the same time that they barely suggest the hedgerows, copses, and fields of Burgundy. At any moment, they could shift back into formless paint. Some of them are so fluid that they seem to point directly to Helen Frankenthaler at her most allusive.

The sense of incompleteness, of imminence, embodied in these landscapes is something we are familiar with from Degas's figures. His bathers always seem to have been caught in moments of no importance, chosen apparently at random from an infinity of gestures and motions, while his dancers are posed in attitudes of transition, neither the alert stance of preparation nor the triumphant achievement of a fully extended *arabesque*. Yet these "incomplete" postures contain both the memory of the activity's beginning and the promise of its achievement, something that is made material in the landscape monotypes' apparently temporary existence as landscape image, before subsiding back into liquid paint, an implied instability that can be read as a metaphor for the cycles of nature itself.

The sense of imminence in Degas's landscape monotypes, like their audacious color and extreme simplifications, makes them appear to twentieth-century eyes to be modern, personal, and virtually abstract. The question, of course, is how Degas thought of them—not to mention how they were seen by others in their own day. It's possible, for example, to find Turner watercolors that modern-day viewers can read as "abstract pictures," but that were obviously no such thing. Turner intended them as color studies, never as finished works, and did not exhibit them. But Degas signed and exhibited some of his most daring landscapes in 1892. (One of the most pared-down, apparently alluding to a rutted field, is signed and dedicated to Bartholomé; in the collection of the Louvre, it is unfortunately not in the Met's exhibition.) A few contemporary viewers, too, were struck by the power, the poetry, and the dazzling individuality of the works from the Durand-Ruel show. Kendall, however, seems curiously ambivalent about the monotypes. He is obviously enthusiastic about them and maintains, persuasively and perceptively, that the most extreme of Degas's landscapes can be seen as a resolution of his lifelong dual allegiance to the legacies of Delacroix and Ingres, to loosely applied color and carefully rendered form. He sees them, too, as proof of Degas's adventurousness as a landscape painter and as possible challenges offered to colleagues known for their pictures of the natural world.

But Kendall also makes an odd attempt to find literal justification for Degas's economical forms, his departures from naturalism, and even his moody palette—the very things that make the monotype landscapes so potent and so unexpected. Kendall painstakingly describes the colors of the Burgundian countryside in autumn and reminds us of Degas's deteriorating eyesight in his later years. My experience of Burgundy in the fall seems to be different from Kendall's, but I'm willing to accept his version; his allusion to the aging painter's failing vision is more troublesome. As Charles W. Millard has pointed out in his definitive study of Degas's sculpture, the artist's frightening episodes of failing sight were at least partly "a neurotic affliction," and one that the reclusive painter took advantage of to protect himself from unwanted connections. (Degas's poor vision is often cited as an explanation of why he began to make sculpture, but while dating of these works is always problematic, it is clear that his beginning to work in three dimensions predated any serious deterioration in his eyesight.) Kendall's allusion to Degas's vision in relation to the soft-edged, blurred forms of the monotypes seems unworthy of

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him. It's awfully close to those articles, usually written by art-loving doctors, that assure us that the elongations of El Greco's figures were caused by the painter's astigmatism. What happened to intent?

But this is a quibble. Kendall's book is otherwise fascinating, scrupulously researched, and well written. It's a formidable marshaling of meticulously assembled evidence, a little repetitious at times and equipped with a few too many pedantic site charts showing the artist's point of view, but these are small deficiencies. (Kendall must have had a good time following the homemade chart of Degas's and Bartholomé's travels through Burgundy, and tracking down other Degas sites; after all his labors in the archives, we can grant him that.) *Degas Landscapes* is an excellent, handsome volume with a clear, persuasive text. It's a welcome addition to the Degas literature.

The show is a joy. Not only is it truly informative but it is immensely rewarding aesthetically. Degas has become no less elusive or unpredictable now that yet another, boldly experimental aspect of his work has been rediscovered. If anything he emerges as an even subtler, richer, and more challenging artist than we had imagined. And quite apart from anything else, those darkly glowing hillsides and fields are the perfect antidote to this year's relentless winter.

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Seductive monsters: Laclos's "Liaisons dangereuses"

by Renee Winegarten

I believe that the sect of Epicurus, introduced into Rome at the end of the republic, contributed greatly to produce a harmful effect on the heart and mind of the Romans.
—Montesquieu

Sometime during the winter of 1789-90, Pierre-Ambroise Choderlos de Laclos, notorious author of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, was impatiently cooling his heels in a London antechamber, because that paragon of dandies, George Prince of Wales, had not yet finished his toilette. So bored was Laclos at this princely levee that, although reputedly a figure of glacial reserve, he unburdened himself to Comte Alexandre de Tilly, no mean roué in his day. The dubious Tilly reported the novelist's words in memoirs published many years later. "I decided to write a work that should depart from the trodden path, make a stir, and reverberate on this earth after my demise," confided Laclos, adding for good measure that certain characters and events in his novel were based on actual persons (indicated with tantalizing discretion), and on circumstances with which he himself was directly or indirectly acquainted. Tilly, surprised by his companion's unaccustomed eloquence, added a footnote to stress that he remembered what Laclos had said as if it were yesterday.

Deliberate, lucid, far-seeing, Laclos (as reported by Tilly) sounds as if working in fulfillment of a plan of campaign. He certainly achieved all three of the declared aims. While adopting the form of the story-in-letters employed by writers he most admired —Samuel Richardson in *Clarissa* and Richardson's disciple Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*—he subverted with wit and irony these lengthy moralizing works of seduction. By concentrating only upon what would advance the drama, Laclos produced a book that has been called the first well-made French novel. Drama indeed: Laclos favored the theater and theatrical metaphor. He wrote a play and the libretto for an *opéra comique*—both lost.

When it was published in 1782, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* caused a veritable sensation. Along with Tilly, the novelist's contemporaries looked for real persons behind the Vicomte de Valmont, the Marquise de Merteuil, and Cécile Volanges. Queen Marie-Antoinette had her copy bound without title or name of author. The famous actress and novelist Marie-Jeanne Riccoboni wrote to Laclos to defend French womanhood against aspersions that she felt were cast upon it by the portrayal of Mme de Merteuil and her monstrous machinations. Comtesse Félicité de Genlis, a prolific and celebrated novelist, claimed in her memoirs that no woman could publicly admit to having read so infamous a work. There would be no love lost between Laclos and Félicité de Genlis. Yet if the novel made Laclos famous, it also blackened his reputation. His contemporaries would persist in seeing Laclos—who was to prove a most devoted husband and

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father, of solidly conventional family views —as Valmont, the machiavellian libertine. When Laclos became secretary to the Duc d'Orléans in January 1789, a few months before the fall of the Bastille, ousting from political influence that prince's former mistress, Félicité de Genlis, he was widely conceived as a man of darkness, a conspirator capable of anything.

Are readers to take *Les Liaisons dangereuses* simply as a salacious work whose "moral" is tacked on for convention's sake, or does the book pursue a deeper intention? Fascination with the enigma of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* has endured down to our own day. The dramatized English version by Christopher Hampton, which most skillfully fillets the novel, was originally staged in 1985 by the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford-upon-Avon on the intimate stage of The Other Place, with the egregious Alan Rickman as Valmont. It transferred to London, to the Barbican Pit, and then to the West End, survived various changes of cast, toured the provinces, and evolved into a popular American film. Another movie based on the novel appeared at about the same time. Hampton's stage version has often been revived, and the Royal Shakespeare Company alludes to the piece as one of its major successes of the last decade. Now an opera based on the novel is announced for the San Francisco Opera House. What is there in this tale of pleasure-loving, perverse French aristocrats on the eve of the French Revolution, to capture a modern British and American audience? The answer may well lie in its treatment of sexual warfare and of woman's fate, and in the hidden agenda suggested by its author's political and social views.

The resentment that inspired *Les Liaisons dangereuses* still burns through this singular work, the only novel produced by Laclos, a deeply ambitious soldier, inventor, politician, journalist, and wit. Born in 1741, Laclos came of a family only recently ennobled, and he thus remained on the lower rungs of the nobility. He entered the army at a time when advancement and the most prominent posts went to those of high birth, often regardless of merit. Despite various attempts that were made to reform this unjust system, Laclos never seemed to benefit from them. He was esteemed an exemplary officer, but for many years he did not rise above the rank of artillery captain, nor did he see active service in the American War of Independence and elsewhere, as he ardently desired.

Extremely well read, he passed his time in various garrisons, like the one at Grenoble (scene of the exploits of a possible model for Mme de Merteuil), composing mostly undistinguished light, satirical, or libertine verse. Some youthful adventures of his own and his sharp observation of the conduct of friends, and of the social mores of the privileged, provided him with material for his novel. His powers were reflective rather than imaginative. As he said in his long, admiring essay on Fanny Burney's *Cecilia, or the Memoirs of an Heiress*, he counted the essential qualities for a novelist to be observation, sensibility, and the ability to depict life truthfully. He left sweetness and light to the novels of Mme Riccoboni. The scandal of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* blotted his copybook in the eyes of his military superiors. So did his attack on Vauban, the great military engineer who had built fortifications under Louis XIV and who was commonly regarded as above criticism. Mere artillery captains were not expected to publish their critical views on such matters. Moreover, the experiments that Laclos undertook to develop a new kind of bullet were not pursued. In short, Laclos was a man of talent, energy, and independent mind, who was being constantly frustrated in his chosen profession.

The opportunity for Laclos to try to change the existing unfair order of things came when an aristocratic protector introduced him into the household of Louis-Philippe-Joseph, Duc d'Orléans. This liberal, pleasure-loving, irresponsible prince, regular thorn in the flesh of his distant cousin Louis XVI, would later become notorious as Philippe Egalité. Historians differ as to how far the activities of the Anglophile

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Duc d'Orléans in the early months of the Revolution were influential. What matters here is that contemporaries firmly believed that there existed an Orléanist conspiracy and that Laclos, his new secretary, on leave from the army, was its moving spirit. The wealthy Duc d'Orléans then had on his payroll many of those who were to be leading actors in the revolutionary period, including Mirabeau, Danton, and Brissot, future luminary of the Girondins. It was Laclos, however, who is thought to have composed the famous *Instructions*, an influential and much imitated document sent out by the Duc d'Orléans to his bailiwicks in the period leading up to the Estates-General of 1789. This document demanded guarantees of personal liberty and freedom of expression, and even advocated divorce.

Rightly or wrongly, Laclos was believed to be responsible for distributing "Orléans gold" to win popularity for his master. Consequently, he was accused of suborning not only the rioters at the Réveillon wallpaper factory in April 1789 but also the working women of Paris who marched to Versailles in October of that year, an upheaval which resulted in the humiliating forced return of Louis XVI and his family to the capital. Much to Mirabeau's disgust, that weak reed the Duc d'Orléans failed to seize the opportunity to become Regent, and found himself dispatched on a "diplomatic mission" (virtual exile) to the Court of St. James, where we first met Laclos. It was Laclos who penned the correspondence of the Duc d'Orléans with the French Court, including that prince's long letter of self-justification requesting permission to return to Paris (a letter scorned by Félicité de Genlis, who was convinced that she could have done better).

Once back in Paris, the Duc d'Orléans and his secretary became active in the Jacobin Club. Laclos took part in debates as well as busying himself with the creation, editing, and publication of its journal. The flight of Louis XVI and his family, their recapture at Varennes, renewed the question of the King's abdication, and once more opened the path to the Regency of the Duc d'Orléans. Again he declined to seize the opportunity. Laclos, apparently unable to abandon the hopes he had pinned to this wavering star, wanted to make his master Regent in spite of himself. He keenly favored a national petition in which everyone, "all good citizens"—a category that significantly included women—would be able to express their opinion. Privily, to favor the Orléans cause, Laclos even made an alteration to Brissot's text of the petition, which led Brissot to say that all unknowingly he had been party to yet another *liaison dangereuse*. Laclos was foiled—by his old enemy, Félicité de Genlis. He retired from politics and returned to the army. The Duc d'Orléans went on as Philippe Egalité to vote for the death of the king and to die like his cousin by the guillotine.

During the Terror, Laclos was imprisoned on three occasions but, possibly owing to some powerful protector, he was eventually released. Laclos was not a republican like Brissot: he was a monarchist who had wanted a change of dynasty to bring about "a regenerative revolution." He was among the few prominent revolutionaries to have the good fortune to survive the Terror. He could not, though, escape the odium that attached to all those who had served Philippe Egalité.

Laclos said once that he wanted a monarchy "so as not to have to decide one day, perhaps very soon, between Caesar and Pompey." Soon enough, after the coup d'état of 18 Brumaire (November 9) 1799, he would be enjoying the favor of Napoleon Bonaparte, a fellow artillery officer, some twenty-eight years his junior. As General Laclos, his experiments with the bullet were now welcomed. Promoted to commander of the artillery reserve, he served under Marmont during Bonaparte's Italian campaign. Stendhal (who said that as a boy in Grenoble he had been given sweetmeats by the original of Mme de Merteuil) later claimed to have met the elderly General Laclos in Milan in a box at La Scala in 1800, and to have courted him as the author of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. On hearing that Sten-

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dhal (then, as Henri Beyle, a sublieutenant of dragoons aged seventeen) was a native of Grenoble, Laclos showed that he was moved. It seems less likely, however, that on another occasion in Naples, Laclos gave him a list of "great lords of 1778" with notes on morality. Laclos fell gravely ill and died in Taranto in 1803. No trace remains of his tomb, which was destroyed at the Bourbon Restoration in 1815.

Such was the author of *Les Liaisons dangereuses, or Letters collected in a certain Society, and published for the instruction of others*, to give the book its full title of 1782. The enigmatic epigraph, taken from the Preface to Rousseau's *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*, ran: "I have seen the manners of my day, and I have published these letters." The so-called "Publisher's Foreword" observed with biting sarcasm: "Indeed, several of the characters he [the Author] places upon the stage, are so immoral that it is impossible to imagine that they could have lived in our age; in this age of philosophy where the universal spread of enlightenment has, as everyone knows, made all men so virtuous and all women so modest and retiring." The "Editor's Preface" laid the claim to a moral intent, as was then *de rigueur*. The ending of the novel, with the exemplary death of Valmont in a duel (after the style of Richardson's Lovelace), and the social and financial ruin of Mme de Merteuil and her disfigurement by smallpox, are clearly intended to convey the salutary message that the evil-doers have been punished. Yet eighteenth-century critics, to be followed by their heirs, could not help noticing that the depiction of the seducers and their wiles is adorned with every attraction, including charm, intelligence, and wit.

Laclos would not be the only writer to intend to write one kind of book and to appear to produce another. If taken as the portrayal of the manners of a certain privileged class in general, the book could be seen as "one of the revolutionary flood waters which poured into the ocean that submerged the Court," wrote Tilly, long after the event. (In this sense Christopher Hampton would not be far off the mark in suggesting that Mme de Merteuil was going to be punished not by smallpox but by the guillotine). There were those who thought that what they called "the moral degradation of the aristocracy" was a major cause of the Revolution. Doubtless, the contempt that the sexual license of the privileged engendered, especially as rudely targeted in satirical underground scandal sheets, contributed to undermine respect for the society and institutions of the *ancien régime*.

Laclos himself was to perceive that this total absorption in sexual pleasure was harmful to society and to the body politic. In a memoir on foreign policy addressed to Committee of Public Safety in 1795, he listed among the causes of the Revolution not only financial mismanagement but also something from which he himself had suffered, "the scandalous abuse of favor and intrigue which allowed only incapable persons or those of ill repute to attain position," together with "a profound immorality which the Court no longer even took the trouble to conceal." There is no doubt about the existence of debauched eighteenth-century rulers and monarchs, like the Regent Philippe III d'Orléans (great-grandfather of Philippe Egalité) or Louis XV, and libertine aristocrats of both sexes, from Mme de Tencin to the Maréchal de Richelieu. The Marquis de Sade himself (born 1740), so astonishingly and consistently rehabilitated by writers in our own day, was a close contemporary of Laclos: *Les 120 Journées de Sodome ou l'Ecole du Libertinage* was written in 1785, three years after *Les Liaisons dangereuses* appeared. Baron Grimm had declared in 1782 in his *Correspondance littéraire*, addressed to subscribers among the crowned heads of Europe, that people mentioned more than one society that could have given Laclos the idea for his seductive monsters.

The ambiguity inseparable from *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, one aspect of its perennial fascination, is linked to the legend of Don Juan from which the novel can scarcely be disassociated. Laclos mentioned Molière's Tartuffe when discussing the hypocrisy of

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his characters with fellow novelist Mme Riccoboni, but it was above all another of Molière's hypocrites, his Don Juan, that Laclos could not have overlooked. Valmont, after Molière's libertine anti-hero, places noble birth above virtue and piety; he also sees his pursuit of women in terms of military heroism, *gloire*, and conquest; he, too, makes use of religion in his desire to overcome the scruples of the devout Mme de Tourvel.

The Don Juan legend, from Tirso de Molina's *El Burlador de Sevilla* to Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, can scarcely be separated from religion and repentance; it moves from the seducer who constantly postpones the day of reckoning to the Don who defies the repeated warning to repent: "Pentiti, scellerato!"—both of whom are swept down to hell. Valmont is not a Satanist, as Baudelaire suggested, because that would imply belief in Satan, and he has no belief at all. Rather Valmont appears as an overreacher, a blasphemer who needs a divinity to defy. He does not want Mme de Tourvel to abandon religion; on the contrary, he cruelly wants her to suffer all the more through her faith and her torments of conscience. He cries: "I shall have this woman; . . . I shall dare to ravish her from the very God she worships." And he adds that in the moment of success, "I shall really be the God she will have preferred." The frisson that such a horrid boast provokes has less to do with faith than with something deeply primitive and contrary to reason and order. There needs no Statue come from beyond the grave to punish such hubris. We are in the world of human beings abandoned to themselves and their own instincts, their own destructive and self-destructive urges—the world we know.

Yet as if the masculine Don Juan were not enough, Laclos presents us with a singular feminine version of Don Juan ("a real female Lovelace," according to Grimm) in Mme de Merteuil. Like Valmont, her former lover and her co-conspirator, she too cares nothing for religion, and she lives only for power and sexual gratification in numerous amours. However, as a woman she is obliged to hide behind a mask of social respectability. Whereas Valmont is received in high society despite his reputation as a seducer, she would not be received there if her mask of virtue were to slip for a moment. In the famous Letter 81, Mme de Merteuil gives an account of her upbringing, her loveless marriage, her realization that only by ruse, by secretly pursuing cold policy, could she achieve her aims. "Not yet fifteen, I already had all the talents to which the majority of our politicians owe their reputation," she owns. It is this startling observation that makes us realize to the full the deviation of her gifts.

All her fine skills of study and intellect are now devoted to punishing her faithless lover, the Comte de Gercourt, by having him (so to speak) made a cuckold before his marriage to young Cécile Volanges. Similarly, Valmont, with his great name, wealth, position, and all the brilliant attractions of youth and wit, can believe that his conquest of women is equal to the heroic exploits of famous military commanders. The scene of the perverse and pernicious activity of Valmont and Mme de Merteuil seems far too small for them. As Baudelaire remarked, their "strategy is devoted to winning a very frivolous prize." With so many gifts and so much energy they should surely be able to do something more significant. Instead, they occupy their time in intrigue, in manipulating other people in order to "fill the emptiness of their hearts, the futility of their existence," as Grimm expressed it. It is here, perhaps, that we may sense the gist of the novelist's social, moral, and political criticism.

Proud, cold, vengeful, Mme de Merteuil is fully conscious of her superiority over Valmont—indeed, over all men and women. Gradually, we are drawn to see how she has made him her instrument, although he is far too vain to realize this. She quickly perceives that he has really fallen in love with Mme de Tourvel without knowing it. In his rapture he can tell Mme de Merteuil, his former lover, that he has never experienced such

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bliss; to her, this avowal cannot but appear as an outrage to herself. She plays on his vanity to have him send the cruel letter of dismissal that will destroy the life of his devoted victim. In the warfare that follows, both Valmont and Mme de Merteuil are also destroyed. Yet there remains a vital distinction. We are told by a witness that in the moment of his death Valmont revealed himself to be "truly great," as he sought reconciliation with his opponent, young Danceny, whom he had wronged. As for M. de Prévan, the vicious rake whom Mme de Merteuil had exposed to ridicule and obloquy, he is restored to favor in society. In contrast, Mme de Merteuil herself is reduced to public disgrace and ostracism.

Laclos has Mme de Merteuil say to Valmont that "I was born to avenge my sex and to master yours," through means original to herself. Oddly enough, Laclos—with Condorcet—was a feminist. His three writings on the education of women (1783 and after), a question which had long been a theme for impassioned discussion, adapt the ideas of Rousseau. According to Laclos, all women were free in a state of nature but in society they are now in chains. For Laclos, where there is slavery—and, he insists, women are "slaves" in society—there can be no education. Society reduces women to exercise seduction and guile since they lack the physical force to overcome men. In the perennial sex war that rages, women can rarely win, and when they lose, their enslavement only becomes more bitter.

These acute views illuminate retrospectively not only the depiction of Mme de Tourvel and Cécile Volanges as pawns in the sex game but also the treatment of the conduct and destiny of Mme de Merteuil as scourge and avenger. Laclos began his reflections on perfecting women's education with a paradox: there is no way to perfect the education of women in the present state of affairs. The supposed education hitherto given to women does not merit the name. Indeed, the very laws and manners are opposed to providing them with a better education, in his opinion.

After his grim analysis of existing conditions, Laclos went on to propose a surprising solution: he advised women not to wait for men, tyrants and "authors of your ills," to come to their rescue, but to realize that the only way out of slavery was through "a great revolution." And he added: "Is this revolution possible? It is for you alone to say so since it depends on your courage." Laclos puts the ball in women's court—perhaps the easiest thing for him to do in the circumstances, in these pre-Revolution writings that remained unfinished and were never published in his lifetime. A strong hint of his feminist stance, however, does percolate through the portrayal of Mme de Merteuil to startle the modern reader or spectator.

Laclos, then, is at once traditional in his depiction of dangerous female power and highly original in his challenge to women themselves to seek to right the wrongs that he feels are done to them. A number of women would attempt to do so during the French Revolution—in vain. His attitude may be seen as optimistic and utopian in its urge to change society ("a great revolution") and pessimistic in its analysis, thus remaining in accord with eighteenth-century ambivalence. Mme de Rosemonde, Valmont's aunt and a compassionate friend to Mme de Touvel, maintains that the sexes are never truly at one: above all, the perfect happiness in love that women dream about is an illusion, a trick of the imagination, a "deceptive hope." It is with these dour notions that Mme de Rosemonde tries to console her friend—Job's comforter indeed. Yet this disillusion harmonizes with the author's profound pessimism.

The novel as a whole leaves the impression that his decent characters, or those who are trying to be decent, are blind fools. Mme de Volanges is deceived by Mme de Merteuil's mask of virtue; she fails to keep a keen maternal eye on her young daughter, Cécile, who is all too easily corrupted and debauched by Valmont. As for Mme de Tourvel, she is tricked by her pride into believing that she has wrought Valmont's conversion, and worn down by his passionate pursuit.

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Brutally cast aside, Mme de Tourvel withdraws to the convent in shame and agony, and she virtually wills her own death. In this respect she resembles Richardson's Clarissa, but without the odor of sanctity. In the world of Laclos, the decent are defeated, the innocent maimed. As a good husband and father, Laclos fully intended to write a second novel to embody the notion that "there is no happiness outside the family": he spent many years thinking about it, but he could not do it.

This is a world where those with the means and urge to do so can freely enjoy manipulating and destroying others. The sheer intelligence of Valmont and Mme de Merteuil, and their insight into the minds and hearts, the weaknesses of their victims, are nothing less than stunning. One might at first be inclined to speak of motiveless evil on the lines of Iago, were it not that these supreme egoists do have the motive of selfish pleasure and the superior satisfaction of exercising deceit and power. Moreover, there is often a kind of black humor in their deleterious activity that recalls the tone of Richard III rather than of Iago. The supreme example of this is the brilliant letter of *double entendre*, addressed to Mme de Tourvel, that Valmont pens in bed with a courtesan while using her back as a desk. There is here a blending of cynicism and wit to which one responds with a certain revulsion, astonishment at the skill with the words—and, it must be owned, rather ashamed amusement at the black comedy.

In his telling 1939 essay on Laclos, André Malraux said that the book presented more than the application of the will to sexual ends: rather it revealed what he called "the eroticization of the will," the transformation of something without an explicit sexual meaning into the motive for erotic pleasure, the intermingling of will and sexuality until they formed a single realm. All that separates the novel from the mores of today is the presence of social constraints that were ineluctable in the eighteenth century and that added to the savor of the dangerous game.

In the novel everything has moved into the sphere of sexuality and power. The word "heart" is employed to mean sexual pleasure. Only Mme de Tourvel sacrifices herself for love and finds her self-sacrifice mocked. Significantly, she is the one major character that Laclos had totally invented, if the avowals to Tilly are to be believed. Here are careless fools, blind instruments, along with clever knaves who might be better employed—a privileged society that does not realize it is on the brink of ruin. With its ruthless probing of the interplay of egoism, sexual gratification, domination, and power politics, the theme of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* chimes with one of the most all-embracing and so far apparently ineradicable preoccupations of present-day culture, as expressed through many of its leading and lesser pundits and its artistic products. Even the undercurrent of danger and threat, adumbrated by Laclos, is not entirely missing.

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Poems
by Daniel Mark Epstein & Robert Pack

The boy in the well

How brightly the stars shine beyond the day,
Men at work in town, children at school.
Birds twitter in a feathery mimosa
And ghosts visiting the abandoned farmhouse
Far from town, slip through the fingers of light.

Ding dong dell, Johnnie's in the well,
Deep in the farmhouse well, out of sight
Of all but God's curious, unsleeping eye.
He's fallen far from the wafer of light
Which hovers above him at the mouth of day,

Fallen down, down the green stone cylinder
To a moist hole where there are no answers
To his cries but his own echo or
A cicada maybe, the prophecy of a crow.
A rope tied to the windlass slipped.

Who put him in? It was his own notion
After the blind beggar in town explained
How from a pit delved deep enough
You could see the stars shining at noon.
So many nights lying on his bed, gazing

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At Orion swaggering across the heavens,
The boy would dream he was in a cave,
Warm and wise, watching stars dance
Above the literal day uncommonly bright,
Constellations acting out the old legends.

Down in the well the boy thinks he hears a cicada
Or maybe it's the strange echo of his voice.
How brightly the stars shine beyond the day
Which by now has journeyed far beyond morning.
He wishes on one star with all his might,

That Orion might reach down and save him
Or wake him from this nightmare in his own bed.
He doesn't know anymore if it's day or night.
By now the children have come home from school,
All but the bravest. His mother will miss him.

—Daniel Mark Epstein

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The twins

The secret of twins is that they have no secrets
But a code like the jargon of bees
Or the rushing of a creek through grasses
So what is known to one is known to the other.
Falling into step along the beach or boulevard,
Surrounded by light or shadowing each other
The twins project a harmony so perfect
That, to all of us born lonely, destined to struggle
As lovers, parents, brothers, reluctant strangers,
They are a mystery and mild reproof.
We dress them alike, angry over our own strangeness,
Envying those blessed to be born separate and one.
On the green seesaw of their delicate incarnation
The twins balance, a perfect closed parenthesis.

—*Daniel Mark Epstein*

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Observer

Only a universe with an initial density exactly equal to critical density would be capable both of engendering motherly stars and of lasting long enough to provide a home for the nuclear, chemical, and biological reactions required for life to subsist. . . . This "fertile" density is the first condition any universe must meet before it can hope to produce its own observer.
—Hubert Reeves, *The Hour of Our Delight*

Muse of the universe,
muse of mass-energy, I'd never known
critical density
is a conception that I need
to take personally—

the speed required right at the start
for fiery particles to be propelled
without collapsing back because
the pull of gravity
could halt expansion and prevent the laws

that govern entropy and cooling
from engendering enduring stars.
Through improvising time,
mothering stars could then provide us
with a place where melody and rhyme,

in turn, would be conceived from
nuclear and chemical reactions,
from organic ooze.
I'd never known that metaphor
also required mothering, so that deep blues

can represent our gloom,
green can convey renewal, red evoke desire,
and white betoken emptiness
or innocence because initial particles
designed us to express

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what our initiating species has become—
observers of the patient stars
that mothered us to bear
true witness to the story of the past
unfolding everywhere,

enabling us to apprehend the music
of the whirling planets
as they orbited the sun,
enabling us to feel the harmony
fertile density had begun.

So here we are, observing with our eyes
the slant light through the pines
before the orange sun descends
behind the bluish-purple misted hills;
and here we are as moonlight sends

fresh flashings through the lake
and multiplies the silvery reflections
while they slide and spill
and merge with our own thoughts,
which cast their own reflecting light at will

as if the act of looking
added hue and aura to the night;
and here we are at dawn, here's why we came,
observing with our ears
the way the whip-poor-will repeats his name,

hearing the pulse of words
we have evolved to listen with,
observing with the mind
the mind's brave observations of itself,
enabling us to find

thought can engender from its own
critical density
a fertile universe through which to roam,
which metaphor, in blue or green
or red or white, can designate as home.

—*Robert Pack*

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Art

Unforgotten years

by Jed Perl

During the Ice Age that has hit New York this winter there have been afternoons when the pedestrian traffic on Fifty-seventh Street slows to a trickle and the art galleries are so empty you feel as if you're alone in an arctic dream. In the fugue state that's induced by going around the city in the extreme cold, it may be difficult to feel much of a sense of urgency around contemporary art, but historical shows can take on a special power, perhaps because with New York looking and feeling so unfamiliar, it's easier to slip into a reverie about what New York was like forty or sixty years ago. A visitor to the exhibition at the Zabriskie Gallery that celebrated the Daniel Gallery, which was in operation in New York between 1913 and 1932, could feel transported to the early days of modern art in America, when the work of Charles Demuth and even Peter Blume and Yasuo Kuniyoshi felt confusing, challenging, new. At the Galerie St. Etienne's exhibition "The Forgotten Folk Art of the 1940s" (which is up until March 19), one is reminded of a period when self-taught artists such as John Kane and Morris Hirshfield seemed to hold some precious intuition about the nature of the modern imagination. And at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, there was a show called "Drawing on Friendship" that brought together portraits and self-portraits on paper by a large group of artists, including Nell Blaine, Alex Katz, Ellsworth Kelly, Red Grooms, Fairfield Porter, and Larry Rivers, many but by no means all of whom were associated with the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in the 1950s and early 1960s, when the gallery had something to do with defining the spirit of the times. (The show, in the planning stages for a number of months, turned into a sort of memorial when Tibor de Nagy died at the age of eighty-five on December 25, 1993, a few weeks short of the opening.) To these shows, which were up during the deep freeze of January, I would add two exhibits in October and November: the small, resonant exhibition on the theme of "Miró and New York" that Joan Washburn mounted at her gallery as an accompaniment to the Museum of Modern Art's Miró retrospective, and the beautifully focused Edward Hopper show that was held in the Gagosian Gallery's Madison Avenue space. Taken together, these shows could make a gallery goer believe in some aesthetic fourth dimension, whereby it is possible to see a work of art in the same light that people saw it a generation or more ago.

The Daniel Gallery show at Zabriskie was a salute by Virginia Zabriskie (who could herself do with some salutes) to a dealer whose gallery she never knew firsthand but learned of when Daniel, a poor old man, came to sell her some of the scraps left from his long defunct enterprise. In the introduction to the fine little catalogue that the gallery has produced for the occasion, Virginia Zabriskie recalls her first meeting with Charles Daniel in 1961, when he came into her gallery, which was then on East Sixty-

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fifth Street. "He was a handsome man wearing glasses, tall, balding, with a ruddy complexion and regular features." Zabriskie explains that it was "a Soyer drawing that first brought Charles Daniel to me; he was carrying a small one under his arm, a gift from Raphael to him, and he offered it to me for sale." (We can imagine what the price must have been. Among a vitrine of memorabilia included in the show there was a 1951 receipt, made out by Antoinette Kraushaar of the Kraushaar Gallery, recording her payment to Daniel for a Man Ray watercolor. The price was seventeen dollars.) "I bought the [Soyer] drawing," Zabriskie continues, "and would buy others that he offered on subsequent visits to the gallery. I enjoyed listening to him as he discussed the merits of each work. . . . In passing the hours with Charles Daniel on his regular visits to the gallery during the next decade, I was transported to the early days of the century. I was a very young art dealer then and he seemed to me a very old one. The stories of his gallery were a wonderful counterpoint to my own experiences, often with the same artists as I have continued to exhibit in the later half of the century, many of those he had shown at the beginning, William Zorach, Abraham Walkowitz, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, B. J. O. Nordfeldt, and Man Ray among many others."

There's a terrible aspect to the Daniel story, for his gallery could not survive the crash, and in the end he went into bankruptcy, lost everything, and lived out his days in poverty and obscurity. He was ninety-two years old when he died in 1971. Wisely, Zabriskie does not belabor the long sad dénouement. Daniel would certainly want us to remember what Zabriskie's exhibition so vividly calls to life, not so much an individual's taste as the flavor of the period after the Armory show, the period of Alfred Stieglitz's great influence, of the *Dial* magazine, of young American artists who saw the American experience through eyes sharpened by their encounters with the modern art of Europe. A Cubist-tinged way of looking at the world had not yet become the decorative cliché of American Art Deco; the Cézannean revelation, that there was a geometry to nature, could still hit young American artists with the force of a revelation. The small gallery at Zabriskie, hung with drawings and watercolors by Demuth, Elsie Driggs, Hartley, Nordfeldt, and others, was the most beautiful part of the show. The Demuths, which included studies of a bunch of iris and a stand of trees, were both delicate and bold. The show gave us the early American moderns at their most immediate and unself-conscious, before it became part of their achievement that they would constantly reflect upon the nature of their achievement. Even artists such as Yasuo Kuniyoshi and Raphael Soyer were represented by work that had some edge. The Glackens, a scene of people enjoying themselves at a fairground, was not only in the manner of Renoir, it also had a bit of Renoir's ease and subtle shimmer.

Forgotten: this word which appears in the title of the show "Forgotten Folk Art of the 1940s" at Galerie St. Etienne could as easily have been used in the title of the Daniel show at Zabriskie. Yet the idea of forgotten times may not necessarily be relevant, because many of us will never have had the opportunity to know some of the work that's being exhibited, and it is not clear that we can feel that we've forgotten what we never knew. At Zabriskie and St. Etienne the past is presented as present. By gathering together works of art that express the overarching sensibility of an earlier period, it is possible to free the individual works from that most awful of fates, the sentimentality of the period piece. In the Zabriskie show we saw the youthful Demuth as the great critic Henry McBride would have seen his work seventy-five years ago. At Galerie St. Etienne one slipped into a lost period, too, the moment when cultivated Americans were turning up a whole batch of homegrown Douanier Rousseaus. In a brochure published for the St. Etienne show, the exhibition is related to a recent interest in Outsider Art (the art of untrained artists,

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often the mentally ill). It is pointed out that "the initial American champions of non-academic art were members of a fairly sophisticated elite. It was an artist, Andrew Dasburg, who in 1927 prevailed upon the jury of the prestigious Carnegie International Exhibition to admit a common house painter, John Kane, thereby making him the first self-taught artist to be recognized by the establishment. Though there was as yet no commercial gallery network prepared to promote non-academic art, luminaries such as Duncan Phillips, Mrs. John D. Rockefeller and John Dewey bought paintings directly from Kane." "The Forgotten Folk Art of the 1940s" includes fourteen artists in all. Grandma Moses is the best known, though far from the best. Patsy Santo, a name new to me, is represented by three striking landscapes, all circa 1950, rural scenes that are interesting in their delicate sobriety. Kane is the most impressive of these artists, although he is not especially well represented in this show. His Pittsburgh landscapes, with their intermingling of natural and industrial forms, are so powerful and self-assured that they feel like an inevitable expression of the rough, strange beauty of the place.

Back to the St. Etienne brochure. "In 1933, MOMA's director, Alfred Barr, Jr., announced a trio of exhibitions devoted to what he deemed the three principal strands of modern art: Cubism and Abstraction, Dada and Surrealism, and non-academic painting. The third in this series, 'Masters of Popular Painting,' opened in 1938 and included works by Kane, Lebduska and the recently discovered Horace Pippin." It also included works by the Europeans, among them the supreme Douanier Rousseau. The next year, the Modern put on another popular painting show, this one called "Contemporary Unknown American Painters." It included works by Gregorio Valdes, a native of Key West, about whom the poet Elizabeth Bishop wrote in 1939 a distinguished essay, one of the best ever written about an untutored artist. Bishop has much more to say about the man's character than about his art, but perhaps the flat-out power of a personality is always what holds us in this kind of work. Bishop concludes with the thought that with people like Valdes, "everything they are and do seems to be all of a piece, so that even if they wanted to they could not be or do otherwise." This is the magical, inevitable unity that we sense in the work of all the best folk artists. (Perhaps the reason that I am unconvinced by the work of Morris Hirshfield, another artist represented at St. Etienne, is that I suspect that he could do otherwise, that his stylizations are not really of a piece.) What seems to have held the sophisticated public of the 1940s was that these unsophisticated artists had, intuitively, arrived at some of the salient characteristics of modern art: its departures from conventional ideas of reality; its flatness; its equal emphasis on all parts of the canvas, which suggested that a new democratic principle prevailed in the world of form, or at least a new politics of form. What the trained artists had had to unlearn in order to become modern the untrained artists already seemed to know. This in turn suggested that modern art was not artificial but natural. At Galerie St. Etienne one feels again the power of these folk artists, and also their limitations, for with the passage of half a century one can see all too clearly that in most cases a little innocence did not go a very long way.

When a few of these historical gallery shows occur in one season, we begin to find hidden links, the web of anecdotal connections that runs just beneath the history of form. Duncan and Marjorie Phillips, who collected Kane, also collected many of the artists who exhibited at the Daniel Gallery. Gregorio Valdes, a primitive who died in 1939 and thus could not be included in the show at St. Etienne, was the subject of an essay by the poet and dance critic Edwin Denby, who was in turn close friends with Rudy Burckhardt, for whom de Kooning painted the tiny composition, circa 1940, included in Washburn's "Miró and New York." And then of course Rudy Burckhardt is the subject of a drawing by Red Grooms in

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Tibor de Nagy's "Drawing on Friendship" show.

Washburn's exhibition, spanning as it did twenty years, 1930–1950, was about overlapping generations and how Miró's influence affected both the hard-edged biomorphic painting of the Thirties and the painterly expressionism that was beginning to come to the fore in the Forties. The artists included were Baziotes, Bolotowsky, Calder, Davis, de Kooning, Gorky, Gottlieb, Hare, Holty, Mason, Motherwell, and Slobodkina. I cannot imagine this group of works looking better than they did in Washburn's new space on Fifty-seventh Street, a small white box illuminated by a skylight—it's one of the loveliest exhibition rooms I've ever seen. The red print on Washburn's small catalogue recalled the bright red cover of the catalogue that the Museum of Modern Art published in 1941, when it did its first Miró retrospective, which was also the artist's first major museum show anywhere in the world. All through the Thirties and Forties, Miró's work could be seen in New York in almost yearly exhibitions at the Pierre Matisse Gallery. Joan Washburn included the 1951 publication *Modern Artists in America*, with its Miróesque cover design by Robert Motherwell; she could also have included Greenberg's 1948 monograph on the artist, the unique case in Greenberg's career of something like an extended treatment of a single artist. (Greenberg's books on Matisse and Hofmann are, by comparison, miniatures.) New Yorkers loved Miró's art for its speed, clarity, boldness, humor, sexiness, sense of the bizarre; they loved it, in short, because it reminded them of themselves. Since the time of the Armory show Americans had been wondering what a homegrown response to Paris would look like. Miró, one of the Spaniards who had conquered Paris, gave a suggestive outsider's insider response. If a Spaniard could beat Paris at its own game, why couldn't a New Yorker? At the Washburn Gallery the shadows of a Calder mobile played across the walls, casting wry Miróesque ghosts on the ambitions of several generations of New York artists.

Tibor de Nagy's "Drawing on Friendship" show was about a generation that took Miró and Company for granted and no longer looked to European art with quite the same yearning. This was the generation that poured into New York in the postwar period, when a bohemian skepticism about the new American prosperity could not disguise the fact that the bohemians were, as much as anybody else, going to be its beneficiaries. Tibor de Nagy was one of the quintessential New York galleries, a showcase for pluralism, Fifties-style, when it was directed by the late John Bernard Myers, who'd been a baby amidst the Surrealists when he worked at *View* magazine in the Forties. Years later, when his association with Tibor de Nagy was past, Myers produced both a memoir and an exhibition with the Surrealist-tinted title "Tracking the Marvelous." The marvelous, according to John Bernard Myers, could be just about anything: Abstract Expressionist paintings by Alfred Leslie, expressionist figuration by Grace Hartigan or Larry Rivers, realism by Fairfield Porter, Color Field by Helen Frankenthaler, Minimalist sculpture by Carl Andre. (One of the first places in New York where a painting by Frank Stella was exhibited was the Tibor de Nagy Gallery.) The gallery lost many of its artists to bigger galleries but John Bernard Myers would probably not have wanted to be anything but the uptown impresario of Tenth Street creativity that he was, involved with artists' theater à la Diaghilev and artists' books à la Vollard. The volumes published by the Tibor de Nagy press are models of elegance; one with poems by Kenneth Koch and silkscreens by Nell Blaine (including some of her fine early abstract compositions inspired by the work of Jean Hélion) is not an unworthy response to the French *livre d'artiste*. Blaine is also a standout in the de Nagy drawing show. Her brush-and-ink sketch of Frank O'Hara's head and bare torso has some of the quickening humor of a nineteenth-century Japanese sketch or a drawing by Marquet. Her drawing of Larry Rivers's head and arms, modeled on the abandoned-to-sensation poses of Matisse's

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languorous (though clothed) models, is not a successful drawing, but I don't think I've ever before seen quite this meeting of high camp and high art. (Rivers's drawing of Nell Blaine, some years before her life was forever altered by polio, does not do justice to her up-for-anything reputation.) Fairfield Porter's pencil drawing of his wife, the poet Anne Channing Porter, is probably, along with Blaine's O'Hara, the best thing in the show. The entire exhibition, in which A draws the portrait of B who in turn draws the portrait of C, was an altogether appropriate homage to an era when community was a reality, not a piety, and people took a deep interest in arts other than the one they happened to be dedicated to, not to mention that they all knew more than a little about the fine art of self-promotion. The galvanic energy of the Fifties came from the sense that "us" was everybody, and everything changed in the early Sixties, when all the rest of the world decided that it wanted to become a part of the us. That transition is memorably recalled in an essay, "Junkdump Fair Surveyed," that John Bernard Myers published in the great little magazine *Art and Literature* in 1964. "'Where were *you* when the shit hit the fan?'—a general query. No good to say it was ever thus, that there have always been changes, *this* coming in and *that* going out. . . . The citadel has been stormed, the ramparts have been scaled. The newspapers keep switching horses; the art magazines are too slow; the intellectuals are undependable."

In the exhibitions at Zabriskie, St. Etienne, Washburn, and de Nagy, we were asked to consider how it was before the shit hit the fan. The Gagosian Gallery, which has in the course of a few years mounted serious tributes to Beckmann, Giacometti, and Pollock, among others, can hardly be said to be indifferent to the past, but then again the success of this gallery has to do with an unblinking assessment of the 1990s, when the newspapers keep switching horses, the art magazines are too slow, the intellectuals are undependable. At Gagosian ironic self-consciousness wafts through the cool air, and this turned out to be an invigorating atmosphere in which to look at the work of Edward Hopper, to whom the gallery devoted a very impressive show. It was a wonderfully shaped exhibition that included many loans from museums and private collections but avoided the repetitiveness that can make Hopper feel like a tiresome, formulaic artist. There's more than a bit of the magazine illustrator about the painter Edward Hopper, and both his successes and his failures depend on how he handles the element of kitsch that's always present in his work. As a painter of the figure, Edward Hopper is nothing but an illustrator, and yet he sometimes manages to give his figures meaning by treating their graphic stiffness as the subject—he uses the commercial cliché as a modern metaphor. That's an attitude we know at Gagosian, from the paintings of David Salle. Looking at Hopper's *Girlie Show*, it was possible to think of Salle's erotic playthings, but Hopper's attention is so unremitting and so weirdly serious, he turns pornographic detachment into artistic engagement (and shows us what a fainthearted artist David Salle really is). What was exciting about seeing Hopper at Gagosian was that this painter, who is now regarded as an old (and even a boring old) master of the American scene, regained some of his critical edge. Not too long ago, they were showing Rosenquist at Gagosian, and what are his paintings but spare parts waiting for some Edward Hopper to pull them together? At Gagosian one felt the rawness of Hopper's borrowings from the advertisements and the movies and the ugly American landscape, the modern daring of his compositions, the uneasy synthesis that informs his very best work. Gail Levin's catalogue essay, "Edward Hopper and the Politics of Modernism," recalled what a controversial artist Edward Hopper once was (and how he struggled against any identification with the American Scene painters). At Gagosian, he was a controversial artist still.

The final painting in the exhibition was

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Two Comedians, self-evidently the artist and his wife, in white pierrotish costumes, hand in hand, taking their bows on an empty stage. This is Hopper's all-American take on the *commedia dell'arte* poignancy of Watteau. The dream of a terrace at Versailles has been replaced by the dream of a vaudeville stage on Fourteenth Street, but the theatricality is, if anything, more unabashed than in Watteau. Hopper's paint handling is choppy, almost spastically awkward; and the deep blue that dominates the picture in impenetrable and gratingly hideous. This is a painting of unremitting ugliness, and yet it holds a viewer with the almost shockingly sentimental device of the old couple in their white costumes taking a last look at the audience that is—us. Hopper embraces every cliché about illusion and reality, and maybe he is so forthright (and wacky) about all this that he defeats the clichés. I am not sure. What is sure is that *Two Comedians* was lent to the Gagosian show by Mr. and Mrs. Frank Sinatra. That is beyond perfect.

Exhibition notes

"Howard Hodgkin: Recent Paintings"
at Knoedler & Company, New York.
December 4, 1993–January 15, 1994

This exhibition of recent work by the British painter Howard Hodgkin was his most interesting show in some time, but only part of the interest derived from Hodgkin's unexpected use of a large format. After a career spent making paintings averaging twelve to fifteen inches square, and at the most only three feet to a side, Hodgkin has lately allowed himself a little more elbow room: some of his new paintings measure as much as six feet by ten feet. These larger paintings don't really work—they are too diffuse and, in some instances, bombastic. But the presence of these large paintings alongside others more conventionally scaled, and the overall unevenness of the work on view, made for an instructive exhibition. It provided insight into just what makes certain of Hodgkin's paintings work and what makes others fail.

Hodgkin has always aimed high. He attempts to recall the sensation of a particular experience or individual—the scent of something, almost—through an abstract pictorial language dominated by large dots and broad gestural marks, all laid down in thick, intense color. There are certain contradictions inherent in this ambition, however: he has chosen a public forum—painting—for the articulation of an experience that is diaristic, even at times hermetic. His ideas are couched in a pictorial language that in some paintings seems engagingly allusive and in others frivolously decorative. In his successful paintings, Hodgkin resolves these conflicts by creating a mood of intimacy consistent with the interior nature of the subject. This is coupled with—or expressed by means of—a hothouse emotional atmosphere. There is also a sense of authenticity, a sense that every mark, form, structure, and color is particular to the experience being evoked by the artist.

All of this—Hodgkin's characteristic modes, his strengths, and his flaws—was on view in the show at Knoedler. One problem with the big paintings was that Hodgkin's language—and maybe even his sensibility—isn't elastic enough to adapt to a change in scale. With most of them one had the same feeling one gets seeing cabinet-scale sculpture blown up for outdoor placement: a kind of awkward disproportion.

Snapshot (1984-93) aims for an epic grandeur, a leap from Vuillard to Turner. A round, yellow-orange form placed near the center is surrounded by passages of lime green, blue, yellow, and more orange. These forms are surrounded by Hodgkin's signature painted frame, this time in black and gray. Another Hodgkin trademark, a cluster of polka dots, orange again, overlaps the painted border on the left. Smaller, it might have worked. Scaled as it is, the painting is simply too large for what it had to say.

As the long gestation required for *Snapshot* indicates, Hodgkin is an intensely deliberative artist, known for working on a single

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painting for years at a time. Yet his recent shows, the present one included, have been marred by an assembly-line quality, as if the artist had been in a rush to complete work and get it out of the studio. There is no conviction in many of the marks and gestures, and often no feeling of resolution to the pictures. There were more than enough examples of this sort of work in the current show, paintings which, when they didn't look rushed, looked aimless, even lazy. *Fisherman's Cove* (1993) was one of these, with the added deficiency of being too literal, too close an illustration of its title. Hodgkin's style does not lend itself to representation in any form.

Yet the show contained its share of successful paintings. *Patrick in Italy* (1991-93) is informed by an exuberence of mood and handling, as well as an inner warmth reminiscent of Matisse's Moroccan paintings. *After Degas* (1993), a painting of shadowy rusts and oranges framed in lime green, has an ominous interior space and is suffused with an overripe heat suggestive of a storm about to break or an impending emotional crisis. The reference to Degas calls to mind his 1868 *Interior* (once known as *The Rape*) in the McIlhenny Collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. But even if one doesn't make the association, it remains a powerful picture.

—*Eric Gibson*

"The Golden Age of Danish Painting" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. February 13–April 14, 1994

Responding to a tribute that called him "the greatest philosopher in Denmark," Søren Kierkegaard wryly corrected the praise: he wasn't the greatest philosopher in Denmark, he was the *only* philosopher in Denmark. I thought often about Kierkegaard while looking at the pictures in this exhibition of Danish Romantic painting, recalling not only his deflationary witticism but also his prickily self-absorbed gloominess. The period covered in this exhibition, 1790–1850, largely coincides with Kierkegaard's dates (he died in 1855 at the age of forty-two). I couldn't help concluding that if Denmark's only philosopher kept up with new artistic trends in his home town of Copenhagen, then perhaps it wasn't only the thought of God and Regina Olsen that made him gloomy.

In fact, exhibitions such as "The Golden Age of Danish Painting" (as well as the Met's show "Caspar David Friedrich to Ferdinand Hodler: A Romantic Tradition," which runs concurrently and leaves one with a similar feeling) raise a number of thorny problems for curators and museums. Generally, one is happier to *have seen* them than to see them. They're educational in the sense that they introduce the public to unfamiliar work; that's all to the good. But unfamiliarity is not itself a measure of artistic success. The trick is to present the material with appropriate qualifications and understatement: always a delicate task, but especially so at a time, like the present, when excessive praise is the norm. Philippe de Montebello, the director of the Met, spoke in a press release about "the beauty of these paintings" and the "wonderful 'northern light' that these works embody." But that's just PR persiflage. The words that need scare quotes are not "northern light" but "beauty" and "wonderful." I'm sure that Mr. Montebello knows this; but he knows, too, that circumspection does not bring the public into the museum.

There are just over a hundred paintings by seventeen artists in "The Golden Age of Danish Painting." All but a few are from collections in Denmark. None of the works is first-rate; many are quite dreadful, some comically so. That pitiless sifter of reputations, the passage of time, occasionally overlooks a genius, and the recovery of genius is always cause for celebration. But nothing like that has happened here. Wilhelm Bendz (1804–1852), Ditlev Conrad Blunck (1799–1845), Johan Christian Dahl (1788–1857), Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg (1783–1853), Christen Købke (1810–1848), Christian Albrecht Jensen (1792–1870), et al.: there's a reason that these names (with the exception

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of Købke, the subject of a recent monograph by Sanford Schwartz) are obscure. Eckersberg, who studied with David in Paris, is credited with ushering in the "golden age" in question. But, as the organizers of this exhibition hint, his real contribution was not as an artist but as a teacher at the Royal Academy in Copenhagen. There is one pleasant nude called *Woman Standing in Front of a Mirror* (*c.* 1837). But the rest of Eckersberg's work—more nudes, some portraits, naval scenes, landscapes, and one or two history paintings à la David—is (to put it politely) primarily of historical interest.

The best of these golden-agers are probably Christian Albrecht Jensen—see especially his 1836 portrait of Hans Christian Andersen—and Christen Købke (who studied with Eckersberg). Partly because his stock is high at the moment, Købke is represented here by twenty-three pictures, nearly a quarter of the exhibition. Unfortunately, he is not an artist who improves with greater familiarity. I predict a dip in Købke preferred in the wake of this exhibition, though it's perhaps worth noting that both the Met and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (where the exhibition was on view last fall) have in recent years acquired works by Købke: Los Angeles a mediocre view of ruins at Pompeii, the Met an accomplished portrait of the artist's brother.

A catalogue of the exhibition, by Kasper Monrad of the Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, has been published by Hudson Hills Press/The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (237 pages, $35 paper).

—*Roger Kimball*

Publisher's note: Back issues of *The New Criterion* are for sale at $6 each. A list of highlights is available upon request from the Office Manager.

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Theater

On belly & floor in Pinterland

by Donald Lyons

Harold Pinter's 1975 play *No Man's Land* has been revived at the Roundabout. I missed its legendary original performances by Ralph Richardson and John Gielgud; this time around Jason Robards and Christopher Plummer were on offer. To paraphrase James Agee writing about a filmed play of the 1940s, trustworthy people tell me that the earlier production would have left me with my tongue hanging out; this one left me with my tongue in my head, and I hope I can make it a civil one.

No Man's Land is a two-acter set "in a large room in a house in North West London" on a summer night and on the next morning. Hirst, a rich geezer, has brought home to prolong their conviviality a literary type called Spooner, a man he's met in a bar. Drinking is the main activity of the play. There seem to be a thousand replenishing treks taken by Spooner to an upstage bar, each to the maddeningly iterated tune of "How's your drink?" or "What are you drinking?" And, as often as not, there is a long pause before any answer comes. If you have a drinking problem, go to this play; the visit will be more tonic than a month of meetings.

Spooner has a gift of gab, of contemptuous and evasive gab. He spins webs of polysyllabic confusion about his own past and present. He may be working as a sort of busboy in the bar; he may have a penchant for peeping-tomism, although he claims never to peep at sex, alleging an aversion to "conjugation, however periphrastic." He claims—or does he?—past acquaintance with Hirst and with Hirst's dead wife. He boasts—or is it whines?—that he has "never been loved." Above all, he strives to distinguish himself from the "lick-spittling herd of literati." You get the picture, or rather you get the awful tone of voice.

Poor Hirst, wits dimmed by malt and by listening to clever spoonerisms, eventually crawls out of the room, as Spooner mockingly doggerels: "I've known this before, the exit through the door, on belly and floor."

And what has this play, all ominously and with its parade of minatory hostility, been thus far, as it were, about? (Apologies to James.) One could say it has been about the mendacious way we construct our identities in social intercourse, on the lines of Prufrock's eagerness "to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet." One could say it has been about a playwright's rhetorical ploys in the invention of character. One could say it has been about the exploitative potentialities latent within the English class system (Oxbridge conman, socially shaky tycoon). One could say it has been about how to make butterscotch ice cream. Pinterland is a mapless vague terrain that seems, again in Prufrock's words, "like a tedious argument/ Of insidious intent/ To lead you to an overwhelming question . . ." But the journey is not worth the ticket, for the language is not funny or sharp enough to amuse (contrast, say, Orton or Simon Gray). And the

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glimpsed notion of human nature behind all the tiresome minimalism of utterance and silence and gesture is merely unnourishingly nasty (contrast Beckett). Is it possible, speaking of real writers, that the parasite litterateur Spooner in this play derives from Harold Skimpole in *Bleak House*? Dickens's cunningly selfish character is, in the words of Q. D. Leavis, "an Amateur, a dilettante, and something even worse. . . . Singing for his supper, always acting a part, he has no real self; a parasite, he has no sense of responsibility." Harold Skimpole is, of course, embedded by his creator in a rich human and social context. What Pinter seems to have done is to write a Skimpole Triumphant, a Skimpole's Revenge, but the dramatic context is essentially heavy-breathing melodrama on the order of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Heavy-breathing, but never, alas, reaching any sort of climax.

After the host crawls off and Spooner makes another drink, two Cockney goons, an older and a younger, sidle on and exchange moronically repetitive, cryptically menacing phrases with each other and with the soused Spooner. They are by way of being the geezer's "friends" and "protectors"—a task they say they perform "out of love." The younger, pony-tailed lout shares some of his private treasures: a photo album and a memory of an episode with a call girl in Thailand. But, as usual in Pinter, the speaker comes across less as a psychological entity, whether frightening or sleazy, than as a congeries of verbal tics. And the next morning brings only more of the same.

Most of the material in this exiguous and dreary play seems a recycling of Pinter's earlier screenplay for the movie *The Servant* (1962), in which a sinister manservant comes to dominate a flaccid master. The fluid, nervous direction of Joseph Losey and the crisp acting of Dirk Bogarde and James Fox gave the thing a flush of life, even if, on reflection, it dwindled into a mingy anecdote. Pinter on stage, though, deprived of the London streets of *The Servant* or the Oxford lawns of *Accident*, another watchable Pinter-scripted film, is a mere noise, an aural pathology of rhythms and arrhythmias.

He began playwrighting in 1957, a year after John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, billed at the time as a blast of working-class linguistic energy blowing into the decorous dramaturgical parlor of Terence Rattigan. Today, the Osborne play looks like the *Angels in America* of its day, a whiny and self-centered tantrum. Just so, Pinter was taken to be subverting, with a snarl and a pause and a stutter, the verbal pomposities and social complacencies of the West End (and of the West). Today, his plays look like the depressive counterpart to Osborne's mania.

The production at the Roundabout treats the script as Holy Writ and inertly indulges all its vices. The director, David Jones, has been directing at the Royal Shakespeare Company since 1964 and has recently directed Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson in *Look Back in Anger* for television. He finds no life in the play: performers freeze rigidly, pose statically, sit stolidly, hurling the dull dialogue at each other as if lobbing the epigrams of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. David Jenkins's set, a glum, brown piece of naturalism, is, for no reason except a stab at self-referential expressionism, framed in great rectangles of brass poles.

The chilly brilliance of Christopher Plummer makes a good enough fit for Spooner (that was the John Gielgud role), although there is a frequent sense that the actor is condescending to the material and would rather be impersonating, say, Henry Higgins. Jason Robards is one of the glories of American acting. While his parts in such posthumous productions of late O'Neill as *The Iceman Cometh*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *Hughie*, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, and *A Touch of the Poet* remain his supreme achievement, his commanding persona—weathered, droll, sharp, flawed—almost always promises artistic delight. But he is granitically Yankee, and this sort of Englishman (the Ralph Richardson role), even if it had been written full-bloodedly and, so to speak, in good faith, would not easily fall within his range. It is doubly sad, therefore,

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to watch him try so hard to pump emotional sense, to transfuse humanity, into the arid locutions of Pinter. The actor seems finally to be doing moral battle with the text. He loses.

RECOMMENDED: *Three Birds Alighting on a Field* by Timberlake Wertenbaker, at the Manhattan Theater Club. This time the playwright, last represented here in the 1990 production of the Australian-convict drama *Our Country's Good*, has turned to comedy; her target is the recent London art scene with all its fads, fancies, and phoninesses. As happens with satirists, she is more on target about what she doesn't like—her "negatives" —than about what she does—her "positives." When an art dealer, trying to move an empty space surrounded by a frame, murmurs about it's being "a difficult work, a slow work" . . . when a *nouvelle-riche* Texan prevails on that same dealer to take back some Basquiat-like graffiti on the grounds that she doesn't need to be reminded of whence she came . . . when socialites compete to save Romanian churches, we feel we're in sure hands. When the lucrative nonsense of the art world is to be tweaked, the thing is fine, if a bit smug. (That certain smugness is made palpable, too, in the cold, chrome-and-glass production of director Max Stafford-Clark and set designer Sally Jacobs.) When, however, a society ditz is redeemed from the emptiness of it all by the raw love and the true art ("abstract landscape," no less) of a scruffy rustic socialist type out of D. H. Lawrence, the play gets less credible. And this despite a sensationally funny performance as the upper-class ditz by English actress Harriet Walker, whose credits include playing Harriet Vane in the BBC Dorothy Sayers series. Imagine a cross between Evelyn Waugh's Agatha Runcible and Joyce Grenfell.

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The media

Winter games

by James Bowman

It was clear to me that we had passed some sort of milestone as a culture (or, as I prefer to think of it, an anti-culture) in January when the radio station I was listening to announced that it was interrupting its regularly scheduled broadcast to bring me a special bulletin—on the Tonya Harding affair. The words that used to presage grave international crises, wars, revolutions, and assassinations, the words whose special kick for the last forty years has come from the knowledge that they might at any time herald the imminent end of the human race now signified that somebody in Portland, Oregon, was reporting that it *looked as if* Jeff Gillooly was going to testify that his ex-wife, Tonya Harding, had been in on the plot to maim her skating rival, Nancy Kerrigan, from the beginning.

Big news, clearly. More than two thirds of Americans surveyed in a CBS poll professed to think that the media spent too much time on the Tonya Harding story, but that answer is likely to be an artifact, a result of the guilt people feel for taking too much interest in it. They imagine that the serious people they want to appear as in the eyes of others would think that too much time was spent on it. I am more inclined to believe in the judgment of editors and producers that this is what people wanted to hear about. CNN was also criticized for broadcasting live the trial of Lorena Bobbitt while giving very spotty coverage of President Clinton's trip to Eastern Europe, but I would be very surprised if those proportions did not reflect what most people actually wanted to see.

No, we must blame ourselves and not the media for the Oprafication of our national life. We can't even blame Oprah and her fellows—though the Tonya Harding story was a case of life imitating talk shows. Nor can we blame the Bobbitt show on Court TV. Coincidentally, Richard Cohen's attempt to portray that cable network's head, Steven Brill, as an irresponsible sensationalist by inventing quotes for a "Talk of the Town" story resulted in *The New Yorker*'s having to recant in an unsatisfying and ungracious apology. But it was the other Richard Cohen, the one who writes a column for *The Washington Post*, who came nearer the mark when he pointed out how recent in human history our idea of privacy is, and lamented that "the communications revolution is paradoxically marching us backward. We're being returned to a single room and find ourselves, in a way, living with the Bobbitts—a media cohabitation that confronts us with fears we didn't know we had."

But more important than the communications revolution is one of its corollaries which I have had occasion to mention in these pages before: the cult of "fame." While to the Bobbitts it came unlooked-for and to Tonya Harding it came after lifelong pursuit, fame was both a justification and a compensation for the entire world's familiarity with their lives. That kind of fame makes certain demands—that one should cry in public, for

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instance, as both Tonya and Lorena did, when one is caught in misbehavior—but its comforts are many and its capacity for forgiveness infinite, as that other Court TV spectacular, the trial of the Menendez brothers for murdering their parents, amply demonstrates. We are glad to invite all these people into our capacious mead-hall, so long as we are given license to discuss such endlessly fascinating questions as whether or not Tonya should be allowed to skate in the Olympics at Lillehammer.

I tried very hard to take an interest in such discussions, but found that I didn't really very much care if Tonya skated or not, and I couldn't really understand why everyone else did. If she did it, she should have been disqualified; if the case remained unproven, she should not—unless, of course, the Olympic committee didn't like her for some other reason. The only moral issue about which I felt strongly was that of Gillooly's ratting on her. However unpleasant the young woman may be—and I am prepared to believe that she is quite unpleasant enough to have plotted to cripple Nancy Kerrigan—and however wrong their marriage may have gone, a gentleman would have taken the rap for her.

You can't really blame Gillooly too much for being a swine, however. How, in this day and age, is a low-life like that to know how a gentleman behaves? Why should anyone suppose that he would have wanted to behave as a gentleman even if he knew? That is the regrettable situation we find ourselves in when honor is superseded by fame. With honor, you have to know what you can and cannot do to obtain it. If you break the rules you are *dis*honored. But fame, with a fine lack of discrimination, comes to the honorable and the dishonorable alike. Society makes rules against certain kinds of behavior—for instance, clubbing someone in the knee—but society has no power to deny anyone the fame that may accrue as a result of clubbing someone in the knee.

Or, for that matter, murdering his parents. The fact that the Menendez brothers almost got off (and they may yet do so) with a manslaughter conviction shows that the right kind of fame can overcome every other consideration. What's a little matter of trying to cripple a skating rival when Lyle and Eric Menendez shotgunned their parents in their own living room as they sat eating ice cream and watching television (talk about the hazards of TV violence!), and the next thing you know, Sally Jessy Raphael is doing a show on "Women who would leave their husbands for a Menendez"? Their claim of sexual abuse by their father was, as Dominick Dunne's excellent piece in *Vanity Fair* shows, almost certainly a fabrication, but their emotion in court was all that counted. Likewise, Lorena Bobbitt, though her complaints of abuse by her husband looked more convincing, not only got off but her knifework made her a heroine to millions of ordinary feminists (at least according to Barbara Ehrenreich in *Time*)—all because she sobbed in court about it.

Yet for some time, Tonya Harding refrained from appealing to the great soppy heart of America by taking a similar advantage of the fact that, like Lorena Bobbitt, she was a battered spouse and, like the Menendez boys, she was said to have been an abused child. It seemed to me entirely admirable of her to concentrate on her skating and refrain from going on the talk shows and blubbing about her unhappy life. Then Connie Chung's "Eye to Eye" got to her. Connie clucked sympathetically over Tonya and told us that "to understand her, you have to understand how badly she wants this dream she's had since she was three years old." So Tonya shed a few touching tears and told of her pain, both filial and spousal, and averred that if she got rich off her notoriety she would use the money to set up a trust for special Olympics children.

Gag! I suppose she had to do it. In the enormous room where we all live in one another's pockets, the only unforgivable sin is silence, and hers was harming her, making people think, in one critic's words, "that she is a cold-hearted woman who seems capable of anything—even mayhem." But before she

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yielded to Connie's temptation I would have supported her nomination to fill the next Supreme Court vacancy or other suitable office—or at least have watched one of the mini-series about her that are already in development. How much better than Olympic gold medals would have been the 1994 G. Gordon Liddy award for Emotional Continence! But we forget how far creeping Oprafication has made reticent and modest people into the real freaks. A cartoon in the March number of *Playboy* shows a typical dysfunctional family room with a scruffy and scowling husband and wife watching the televisual announcement: "People who read books . . . next on 'Geraldo.'"

Tonya, alas, does not read books; nor does she like the opera or expensive dinners. Instead, we learned from the interview on "Eye to Eye," she fancies bowling, shooting pool, and "four-wheeling." How can we fail to wish such a down-to-earth person well in her battles with the law? But it is good at the same time to remember that honor is a much more reliable brake upon our vicious natures than law. It is the law's centuries' long attempt to usurp the place of honor which has helped to make the electronic world family room mentioned by Richard Cohen so much less tolerable a place (in all but the physical sense) than was its predecessor, the medieval hall. Thus I confess to a certain guilty *Schadenfreude* when I see the law being undermined by the very breakdown of natural reticence and modesty which it and its eternal obsession with universal "rights" has done so much to foster. Now even television is beginning to get alarmed by the influence of television on legal cases that come into the public gaze. What good is that? Ted Koppel takes a look at the Menendez and the Bobbitt trials and the sort of "talk-show empathy" that influenced them and so what else does he do but have a talk show?

At least the "Nightline" special which brought together lawyers, journalists, forensic experts in the fields of sexual abuse and battered women, and the foreman of the Bobbitt jury was a real hoot. Ted Koppel is by far the most dignified presence on TV. Only his colleague Peter Jennings even plays in the same league. Now that Bill Clinton has taken to imitating Phil Donahue, Koppel is actually more presidential than the president. So here he was doing *his* Phil Donahue in a room full of people who are paid to be passionate public advocates for those of the world's victims who can afford them. He looked like the Pope taking charge of a kindergarten class for the hyperactive.

But for all the canting carers present, the worst phony of the lot turned out to be the jury foreman. In his own way, the celebrity juror is another milestone on the road to Oprafication. His job is not to weep in public but to watch others do it with the sturdy common sense and good values of Mr. and Mrs. Average America. So he stressed what a regular, hard-working kind of guy he was, he and all the other jurors too, and what a lot of common sense he had while a particularly slimy lawyer called Jeffrey Weiner sucked up to him as the representative of jurors in general. He was a splendid fellow, Weiner made it clear, as indeed all jurors are. Salt of the earth. Much better and smarter than any judge or attorney. I particularly liked the bit that followed on from a disparaging remark about the Menendez jury made by Alan Dershowitz—who, with Wendy Kaminer, was almost the only one who said anything sensible. It went something like this:

> WEINER: How dare you call those jurors fools!
> DERSHOWITZ: Not all of them; just the ones who voted to acquit.
> BOBBITT JUROR: You think that you are more intelligent than any juror and I take exception to that.
> WEINER: Good for you!
> UNIDENTIFIED VOICE: Why should we think that jurors are different from everyone else?

Why indeed? Judging by the Menendez and Bobbitt trials, they are certainly no different from the millions of morons who watch daytime TV—though you would think that

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even a moron would find no shame in admitting to being less intelligent than Alan Dershowitz.

Here is the first incredibly un-PC observation of this column. Most people are pretty stupid, really. Maybe they've been *made* stupid by the meejah or by our disastrous educational system, but if they are stupid enough not only to make leaders and spokesmen out of the likes of Oprah and Phil but also to make Oprahs and Phils out of their leaders and spokesmen, then they're pretty stupid. The question is, do they watch Oprah and Phil because they're stupid, or are they stupid because they watch Oprah and Phil? Interestingly, the intelligent Alan Dershowitz thinks it's the latter. He was the only one who provided any kind of answer to Ted Koppel's most provocative question: Why, in Erik Menendez's trial, did all the male jurors vote to convict on the murder charge and all the female jurors vote to convict only on a manslaughter charge? Dershowitz said that it was because it is mostly women who stay home and watch the talk shows.

This, I think, is not so intelligent. But who could blame him if he didn't want to give voice in that forum to the more obvious explanation that can only be stated as the second incredibly un-PC observation of this column: *women are softer than men*. Not universally but as a general rule. You can always find your Margaret Thatchers on the one side or your Ramsey Clarks on the other, but the vast majority of people who have had both a mother and a father would not hesitate if they had to choose which to be disciplined by. Mom is softer. You can get round her by crying and pretending you're sorry and telling her it was the bad influence of your scumbucket friends that made you do it. She'll believe that stuff, just as the matronly jurors—who are now also juror celebrities and have appeared on "Dateline NBC"—of those cute Menendez boys believed that they were driven to it by their childhood traumas. Did they look like murderers? No! They were charmers, and just *so* sorry for what they did.

The aftermath of the trial was a girls' night out organized by Leslie Abramson, Erik Menendez's lawyer, to celebrate the sensitivity and caring of the female jurors—especially in contrast with the male ones, who were, according to *The New York Times*, "boorish, insensitive and biased against both women and homosexuals." See? This is what Jeffrey Weiner didn't count on: when you make jurors into celebrities, any common sense they might once have had immediately evaporates. They start talking like other celebrities and making the same assumption that the rest of the world was created to live up to their expectations. Mind you, in this case they had a first-rate teacher in Ms. Abramson. When a fellow member of the California bar criticized her as "pompous, arrogant, pontificating and self-righteous," she told a *New York Times* reporter last December that "this particular person only seems to exist to say negative things about me. He only lives as a paragraph in a story about me." Arrogant? Moi?

According to the *Times*, the jury room was rife with sexism. "It was hostile in there," said poor Tracy Miller, one of the lady jurors. "There were insults, sexual comments. They tried to outshout us." Another one said: "We were called ignorant asses and empty-headed and 'those women.'" And why? Well, there are two answers to that question: the women's answer is that it is because the men were sexist and insensitive, while the obviously male answer is that it is because the women *were* ignorant and empty-headed. And I have to say, when one of the women is quoted as saying of Erik Menendez's tales of abuse, "No one could make up lies like that. I went home and thought, 'I could kill José [Erik's murdered father] myself,'" I've got to go with the guys. Gender is destiny, I guess.

Was it only coincidence that just as everyone was expressing opinions about the Bobbitt and Menendez trials and the war between the sexes which they betokened, both *GQ* and *Esquire* ran cover stories on "the new woman"? Or that *Time* ran a typi-

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cally overwritten essay by Lance Morrow—also featured on the cover with a composite photo of a pig in a suit and tie—called "Are men really that bad?" But what dreary stuff it all proved to be! The same two or three ideas were brought up again and again and resoundingly thrashed into depressingly familiar shapes. *GQ*'s cover (Geena Davis in what looked like silk pajamas, fetchingly unbuttoned to reveal a girlish midriff) asked: "Ah, women: What do they want? What do they want from *us*?" and a bunch of other questions too tedious to detail, none of which is answered inside. At least when *Psychology Today* ran its "What do women want?" cover twenty-odd years ago, it knew it was quoting Freud.

Esquire's cover featured teen vamp Drew Barrymore without a shirt but with her fuzzy arms, still pudgy with puppy fat, crossed naturally but usefully in front of her chest. Instead of *GQ*'s preoccupation with the eternal verities of womanhood in "the paranoid, PC Nineties," it wisely looked to the future and "the 21st-century fox." Even more enticingly, it promised Tad Friend's account of "The Rise of 'Do Me' Feminism." Now *that* sounds like the kind of feminism that *Esquire*'s readers have been waiting for! Anything to scandalize Anna Quindlen, which it predictably did. But "Do Me" or "Babe Feminism" (as A.Q. calls it) pretty much boils down to the contention that not all feminists are ugly, man-hating, sex-hating slags, which is what men's writing about feminism has been assuring us ever since there has been feminism. Similarly, in *Time* the egregiously "creative" Morrow finds that Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon go too far in supposing that all sex is rape. Now there's an eye-opening counterblast from the men's side!

Do the Misses Dworkin and MacKinnon really suppose that? I doubt it. But Lusty Lance tilts at his straw women with great panache, thus providing redundant evidence that if the Dworkins and MacKinnons of feminism did not exist (and I'm not quite persuaded that they do exist), wise, judicious, moderate, decent fellows like Morrow would have to invent them in order to provide another extreme for them to reject, a western terminus to the continuum of sexual attitudes along which they stake out their "moderate" positions. The sad fact is that even at their best, ruminations about sex are pretty thin intellectual gruel. God did not intend for us to spend our time theorizing about relations between the sexes—though of course we had to once we could no longer spend it theorizing about Him. *Somebody* had to stir things up by saying that all sex is rape or we should have died of boredom.

Not that I deny the existence of the "Do Me" Feminist. So long as there is feminism it will contain within it the sort of tension of which the "Do Me" girls, who according to Tad Friend "want to return sex from the political realm to the personal," are a symptom. And it is a legitimate question to ask what are the stress gauges reading at any given moment. That is why the *Esquire* poll of a thousand eighteen- to twenty-five-year-old women was so much fun. Of course you had to correct for a lot of socially desirable answers (what do you think today's woman is going to answer when asked if she would rather win a Pulitzer prize or the Miss America contest? Duh! I'm surprised that as many as 34 percent chose Miss America), but there was a lot of revealing information.

For instance that a majority would rather receive as a gift really great underwear than a really great novel or that a strong plurality (49 percent) would prefer to marry Frank Sinatra over either Woody Allen or André Previn. The 45 percent who chose to answer the question put a mean dollar-value on their virginity of two and a half million; and when asked if they would rather be arrested for treason or for prostitution they chose treason two to one. My favorite answer was in reply to the question of whether they would rather get run over by a truck or gain 150 pounds. It was obviously one of those Jack Benny, "I'm thinking" questions because it produced a pretty even split, but by a comfortable margin of 54.3 to 42.9 percent the gals voted to be road kill. Why does this cheer me up so?

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Books

Rodin in the round

by William Tucker

Perhaps more words have been written about Auguste Rodin than any other sculptor. By 1902, when Rilke wrote his monograph, Rodin had become the most celebrated artist in the world: his fame and influence were as great as Picasso's half a century later. No artist, not even Picasso, has lived so public a life; in the early years of the century the progress of Rodin's liaisons was reported in the society columns of the New York papers. But the first forty years of that life were spent in virtual obscurity; when recognition came, it was through writers and public officials whose acquaintance he cultivated, and to whom he communicated his own perception of his formative years. With the rejection of the *Balzac* in 1898, Rodin withdrew from the arena of public monumental commissions, devoting himself to the reproduction and exhibition of existing works, and visiting and being visited by the world's elite. He himself (as distinct from his workshop) worked almost exclusively on drawings and portrait busts. *He* had in effect become a public monument also. The next generation of writers were in awe of him, and some, including Rilke, Judith Cladel, and Ludovici, even worked for him. In consequence, the story of Rodin's life was written largely by people who played a part in it, and they were people with a knowledge of how it turned out.

At the peak of Rodin's celebrity, Matisse published his *Notes of a Painter*. Here he characterized Rodin as "a great sculptor," but one whose "composition is merely a grouping of fragments, which results in a confusion of expression." This in contrast to Cézanne, in whose work "all is so well arranged that no matter at what distance you stand or how many figures are represented you will always be able to distinguish each figure clearly and to know which limb belongs to which body." It was Cézanne, says Matisse, whose art embodied the unity, clarity, and structure fundamental to the modernist vision. It was Cézanne who, for the early modern sculptors as well as painters, was "the father of us all."

The Rodin myth developed a life of its own, transcending even the disregard of his sculpture by later artists. As a young sculptor in the 1950s I was enthralled by Rilke's essay, while quite indifferent to, indeed repelled by, most of the sculpture he wrote about. Such a quantity of human flesh animated by such theatrical emotion!—Brancusi's *Bifsteak*. Yet my hero Brancusi in his old age acknowledged his debt: "In the nineteenth century the position of sculpture was one of despair. Then Rodin appeared and succeeded in transforming everything. Thanks to him man became once more the measure, the model from which the statue springs." Henry Moore had acquired a cast of the *Walking Man*, and David Smith was photographed in front of another cast of the same sculpture. Young art historians, like Albert Elsen and Ruth Butler, were starting to reexamine the myth through an investigation

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of the sculpture itself and of contemporary documents.

It is difficult to imagine the sculpture garden at the Museum of Modern Art without the looming presence of the *Balzac*, but that cast and the *St. John the Baptist*, the first Rodin sculptures in the collection, were acquired only in 1955. Until the MOMA exhibition of 1960 and Elsen's accompanying monograph, it was quite possible to construct a history of modernism in which Rodin simply played no part. Thirty years on, the Rodin resurrection is largely accomplished, with great exhibitions like the Washington "Rodin Rediscovered" of 1981 and Catherine Lampert's London "Rodin: Sculpture and Drawings" of 1986; with the opening of the Rodin museum archives; and with the publication of, for example, Elsen's *In Rodin's Studio* (1979), a collection of photographs that Rodin commissioned of his sculpture and that were integral to his working process. Ironically, the re-evaluation of Rodin has taken place in the context of a general revival of interest in the academic and commercial sculpture of the period, which Rilke called "the superficial, cheap and comfortable métier . . . based upon models, poses and allegories"—everything, that is, to which Rodin was opposed.

The Rodin revival has thus been more a matter for scholars and historians than for sculptors. It has taken place at a time when the practice of sculpture itself has continually been questioned, its boundaries extended into landscape design, theater, and photography. What is notably lacking, in the 1990s as in the 1860s, is a sense of the presence of the human body, the lived experience of the body, not a mere image or a sign for it.

Ruth Butler's new biography of Rodin [1] comes at a good moment, then, and it goes a long way toward answering the perennial questions raised by the career and reputation of Rodin—the causes of his early rejection and failure, and equally of his amazingly swift acceptance and success in the early 1880s, the nature of his relationships with women, the public triumph and private tragedy of his declining years. These problems reside in Rodin's unique and amazing talent and his own ability to understand and control it; in his complex character and family history; in the history and practice of sculpture itself; and in the political and social conditions of late-nineteenth-century France.

There is no one better qualified to handle these questions: Ruth Butler has been a student of Rodin since the 1950s. Some twelve years ago she published *Rodin in Perspective*, an invaluable collection of written reactions to the work of Rodin, both during his lifetime and subsequently. Her 1975 book, *Western Sculpture, Definitions of Man*—now inexplicably out of print—is to my mind incomparably the best survey of the treatment of the figure from the *Venus of Willendorf* up to the 1960s. For the "Rodin Rediscovered" catalogue, Butler contributed an article on "Rodin and the Paris Salons," demonstrating how the success of sculptors like Mercié and Dubois, who combined a quattrocento and naturalistic approach to the figure with the prevailing national mood after the defeat of 1870, set the tone for Rodin's first figure entry, the *Age of Bronze*.

Rodin: The Shape of Genius is the first biography to be based on the resources of the Rodin Museum archive. Rodin seems to have kept every letter, receipt, and review (he subscribed to the earliest press-cutting services), and thus the opening of the archive to historians has finally allowed the separation of fact from rumor, anecdote, and opinion—"the constellation of misunderstandings that have gathered about a new name," as Rilke wrote. In contrast, Frederick Grunfeld's *Rodin*, which was published in 1987, was intended to "reflect something of the literary aura that surrounded the life and times of the most famous artist of an age teeming with notable writers on art." Though fluent and readable, the book is essentially a compilation of already published

1 *Rodin: The Shape of Genius*, by Ruth Butler; Yale University Press, 591 pages, $35.

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material, a recycling of the Rodin myth. Thus Grunfeld repeats Judith Cladel's assertion, which must have been gained from Rodin himself, that the artist's father tried to discourage him from a career in sculpture. Butler quotes from a letter possibly written after Rodin had presented him with the remarkable "Roman" portrait bust: "The day will come when one can say of you as of truly great men—the artist Auguste Rodin is dead, but he lives for posterity, for the future. . . . Courage, courage. . . . posterity will give its testimony back to you." Butler gives a new picture of the young Rodin, unsure of his talent, easily discouraged, prone to depression, dependent on his family and on friends like the young sculptor Léon Fourquet, himself the son of a sculptor, whom Rodin met at the Petite Ecole. After Rodin's third unsuccessful attempt at the entrance competition for the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Fourquet wrote: "Do you remember a few years ago . . . we were sixteen and without care, you were already covered with laurels in school and we spoke about art with an enthusiasm that transported me. Michelangelo and Raphael—the great names. . . . And you—I often see you in your atelier with clay between your hands, following the inspiration of your genius. Me—I make copies. But each of us is assured of a future. There is nothing more solid than our dreams." Ironically, Fourquet was to pass the entrance competition himself, and later to work as Rodin's assistant.

Butler shows how the single dominant influence in Rodin's youth was his sister Maria. Three years older, she sounds in her letters less like a sister than a strict parent. When Rodin, at twenty-one, having drawn a number in the lottery that freed him from the obligation to do military service, was evidently planning to leave home, Maria let him know that his good fortune was the result of her prayers to God and the Virgin Mary; "Your heart has changed, you have said good-bye to all the fine feelings that once animated it. You no longer have respect or love for those who have given you so much, those who have made you what you are and could have expected everything in return from you. If you can consider the evil that children do to their parents . . ." and so on in the same vein. Shortly after, Maria herself was to leave home, to enter a religious order, and within three months of taking her vows, was dead of smallpox. As is well known, Rodin was so devastated by her loss that he himself joined the order founded by Father Pierre Eymard. What we did not understand until this account is the dynamic of guilt and control established in this primal relationship with its tragic outcome, which was to inform all Rodin's future relations with women. Rodin was not the "Triumphant Satyr" of popular repute. His serious relationships with women were driven by power rather than sex, and in them he was either master or victim: Camille Claudel and later Claire de Choiseul ("The Duchess" of 1909-12) re-enacted the role of the dominating elder sister, while Rodin himself played Maria to his lifelong partner, Rose Beuret, and to Judith Cladel, his promoter and biographer.

Butler also throws light on the years 1860–77, when Rodin was struggling to make a living as a sculptor's assistant and attempting to break into the magic circle of state purchases and public commissions denied him by his rejection from the Beaux-Arts. She shows that this was not only, or not mainly, a time of frustration at having to work for artists of mediocre talent, like Carrier-Belleuse, and of seeing the Salon successes of younger men like Mercié and Barrias who had negotiated the official route to glory, via the Beaux-Arts and the Prix de Rome. This was for Rodin a time for learning, a painful and protracted education in the nature of his gift and how most effectively to apply it, and also in the "business" of sculpture: how to run an atelier, how to use assistants, how to deal with clients and officials.

From the beginning Rodin had a studio of his own where he would work in the evenings. He never ceased to make sculpture with an eye to the Salon, and, despite his

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poverty, he would employ assistants himself. The history of *The Man with the Broken Nose* shows Rodin coming to terms with his own talent and with the realities of the system. The plaster—"The first good piece of modeling I ever did," he later called it—was submitted to the Salon of 1865, and rejected. He had spent eighteen months working on the clay model. Regardless of the powerful modeling, the subject (an unknown and brutalized face), the fact that it was a mask only (the back of the head had cracked and fallen off in his unheated studio), the lack of a reputable teacher's name to list with his entry—every aspect of the work and its presentation virtually guaranteed its rejection. Unlike Manet, Degas, or Cézanne, Rodin had neither the means nor the ambition to consider himself an "Independent." He always perceived himself as working within an established tradition. Thus he withdrew his piece from the "Salon des Refusés" of that year. But ten years later, Rodin, now a partner with the Belgian sculptor Van Rasbourgh in Brussels, again submitted *The Man with the Broken Nose* to the Paris Salon, this time in the form of a full "Roman" portrait bust, blandly carved by Léon Fourquet in white marble, together with an unexceptional terra-cotta "contemporary" portrait of a Parisian businessman. Both pieces were accepted (this time Rodin listed himself as a pupil of Barye and Carrier-Belleuse) but neither created the least interest. Finally a bronze cast of the original plaster was accepted at the Salon of 1878, where it caught the eye of critics who noticed its resemblance to the Volterra portrait of Michelangelo in the Exhibition Universelle of that year.

Rodin had already started on the nude male figure, which he had determined would make his reputation at the Salon, when he felt the need to see Michelangelo's sculpture at first hand. "The great magician is going to give me some of his secrets," he wrote to Rose Beuret from Florence in early 1876. When he returned to Brussels, "he continued his investigations of the principles of composition on which Michelangelo's figures are founded," wrote the American sculptor Truman Bartlett, whose writings on Rodin were based on interviews with the artist. "At last, he solved the problem, and the mystery became clear. With its solution also came the key of the principles inherent in his own nature." Michelangelo's figures were invented, idealized, and frontal in conception: how was Rodin to capture their rhythm, energy, and power with a contemporary, positivist vision of the body? The answer: to choose an untrained model of the exact physical type, to allow him to find a pose that seemed "natural," and then to build up the volumes from a succession of views—"profiles"—around the figure. The prosaic and methodical nature of this procedure—which in the case of the *Age of Bronze* took three or four hours a day for a year and a half—belies the intensity with which Rodin observed and modeled. What took place was more than a dialogue between artist and model; it could become a magical act of transposition in which the artist *became* the model, the modeled sculpture the artist. Bartlett noticed that the *Age of Bronze* was in effect a self-portrait, that the artist "was concealed in the figure of a young warrior waking from the half-sleep of unknown strength." The figure's slender build, the pose (about to take a step, slightly off balance), the change of title from *The Vanquished* in Brussels to the *Age of Bronze* in Paris, all speak of a hesitant beginning—of, as Butler writes, "an artist in a foreign country with no steady income, still somewhat unsure of his talent, but utterly certain that his skill was superior to his associates."

By 1879 this image had been transformed in Rodin's next Salon figure: with its confident stride, powerful physique, abrupt transitions of view, the *St. John the Baptist* announces the arrival of a new era in sculpture. With this sculpture Rodin discovered the second element of his "secret": as he modeled, he separated parts of the body—hands, arms, head, torso—and worked on them individually before recombining them. Observation and invention, imagination and the craft of sculpture, were thus fused in a pro-

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cedure that allowed Rodin to identify completely with the bodies of his models: and not only the male figures of his first Salon success and the great monuments but also the female nudes of the *Gates of Hell* and the Hugo monument. If the studies for the *Burghers of Calais* and the *Balzac* express through their bodies a range and complexity of emotion completely new to sculpture, they are all subject to gravity, braced against the pull of the earth, or stumbling, or walking: in contrast the women's bodies, powerful, athletic, are centered on themselves: released from gravity, their energy implodes or explodes in every direction.

This review has focused on Rodin's early years, which for me have a particular fascination. There is no equivalent in sculpture to that sense of collegiality among the "Independent" painters; it would be impossible to do for sculpture what the late John Rewald did in his *History of Impressionism*. The future of sculpture hinged on a single life. If Rodin had died in his thirties . . . more prosaically, if he had given up on the Paris Salon, and settled for a comfortable existence in Brussels . . . if he had been *accepted* as a student at the Beaux-Arts, what would modern sculpture have become? The rejection must have seemed devastating at the time, but in retrospect, as his great rival Dalou remarked, it was Rodin's singular good fortune. The award of the commission for the doors of the never-to-be-built Museum of the Decorative Arts was another remarkable stroke of luck, the apparent result of the rivalry between two administrators, the liberal Turquet, providentially appointed in 1879, and his conservative predecessor and constant critic, Chennevières. The commission gave Rodin freedom, government funding, and studio space—an opportunity such as no nineteenth-century sculptor had been offered, and for which Rodin was uniquely prepared. Butler gives a clear and detailed account of the politics surrounding this and the other public commissions which followed. She also describes how Rodin himself developed the political skills to secure his new success, using his astonishing ability in portraiture, for example, to create a circle of allies whose support was to be invaluable in the controversies to come.

The portrait busts and earlier Salon pieces apart, all Rodin's major sculpture was to come, directly or indirectly, from public commissions, and in a relatively short period, the years 1880–97. Overcommitted and overworked, Rodin became notorious for his apparent inability to bring his projects to completion. The fault was not always his, but Butler shows Rodin, in spite of his growing fame, as being as much the prey of doubt and anxiety about his work as was his obscure contemporary, Cézanne. Obsessed by sculpture and, in his later years, by his place in the history of sculpture, Rodin can be said hardly to have had a private life. Rilke used the word "solitary" to describe him; Ruth Butler, after her many years of research, comes to essentially the same conclusion. Rodin used sculpture as his way of reaching out to others; only with clay was he completely at home. This biography enables us to come as close as we will ever be to the private Rodin, and it describes the arc of his career with an unequaled clarity. It will be recognized as indispensable.

A moralist restored

Ronald Mellor Tacitus.
Routledge, 211 pages, $25

reviewed by Vasily Rudich

In the spring of 1985, just a few weeks after Mikhail Gorbachev ascended to power in the former Soviet Union, a curious episode occurred. The students of the Moscow Archive Institute staged a mock trial of the first Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus. That none of the participants in this affair was punished struck me at the time as highly irregular. And in retrospect I recognize in that event one of the earliest signals of the arrival of *perestroika*. It is part of the emperor's offi-

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cial autobiography that he restored supreme power back to the senate and people of Rome and ruled by virtue of his mere *auctoritas*, personal prestige. But despite this disclaimer, the students found Augustus guilty on several counts: usurpation of power, infringement of civil rights, and betrayal of the revolutionary cause. The students based their verdict on one terse statement from the first book of Tacitus's *Annals*. They were right to do so, since in a few lines the great historian encapsulated the gist of what really happened.

> He [Augustus] seduced the army with bonuses, and his cheap-food policy was successful bait for civilians. Indeed, he attracted everybody's good will by the enjoyable gift of peace. Then he gradually pushed ahead and absorbed the functions of the senate, the officials, and even the law. Opposition did not exist. War or judicial murder had disposed of all men of spirit.

From the Renaissance until the mid-1800s, Tacitus exercised a powerful influence on European historical and political thought. Not only did he serve as a major source for the history of the early Roman empire but he was also universally considered an astute analyst of tyrannical rule and a moralist of the highest caliber. To Thomas Jefferson, Tacitus was "the first writer in the world without a single exception," his work "a compound of history and morality of which we have no other example."

Tacitus's eclipse in the middle of the last century—an eclipse that has continued to the present day—is due to the triumph of positivism, social optimism, and secular humanism. These are habits of thought that refuse to acknowledge the veracity of the grim picture Tacitus portrayed of Rome under the dynasty of the Julio-Claudian emperors, established by Augustus. The wealth of archeological and epigraphical data suggests that the advent of the Empire led to an improvement in the material quality of life among wide circles of the populace. Against this background, reports about the waves of terror and suppression of freedom appear inconsequential in the eyes of many modern historians. This owes much, one suspects, to the complacency of the modern mind and to the wish for psychological comfort.

It was for the same reason that, in the interval between the world wars, the public in the West was reluctant to recognize the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis and the existence of Stalin's gulag. Traditionally, the early Empire was regarded as a reign of evil. It now became fashionable to consider it a model of a well-organized society run by an efficient and beneficent government concerned with the rule of law, social stability, and economic prosperity. The contrary evidence was explained away by reference to class interest, ideological bias, or reactionary senatorial propaganda. Contemporary narratives were treated according to each scholar's own, and often fanciful, views on the plausibility of the authors in question. This trend was further advanced by the obsessive desire for originality among scholars: the belief that everything that sounded or looked like conventional wisdom must be by definition wrong. As a result, the tables were turned: blame was placed on the defeated adherents of the old Republic, and the victors—including such infamous figures as Caligula and Nero—were transformed from villains into competent rulers.

Of all our ancient authorities on the period, Tacitus suffered worst. The dramatic and passionate qualities of his writing allowed his critics to postulate that his primary interest lay in literary effect, not in historical truth. His political and psychological insight was dismissed as subjective, and his somber moral vision was declared a product of hypocrisy. Most studies tended to concentrate on Tacitus's remarkably idiosyncratic language and style (he belongs with Cicero and St. Augustine as a great master of Latin prose), on his skill in rhetoric, and on the influence exercised on him by his predecessors. Sir Ronald Syme, the great British historian of Rome, attempted to counter this development in the

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mid-1950s with his magisterial two-volume monograph on Tacitus. Syme demonstrated in painstaking detail Tacitus's reliability as a historical source. Although Syme's conclusions were never repudiated, the scholarly abuse of Tacitus and his methods continued unabated. It was as if Syme's treatise simply did not exist. Finally, in a book that is refreshingly sympathetic to the predicament of an intellectual living under tyranny, Ronald Mellor, a distinguished historian teaching at UCLA, sets the record straight.

Cornelius Tacitus was born in the middle of the first century A.D., in the early years of Nero's rule (54–68). He belonged to the new nobility, recruited by the emperors from the provinces to replace the old Roman senatorial aristocracy that had by then been largely exterminated. Tacitus was the first in his family (which came from Gaul) to enter the Senate. Under the Flavian dynasty, which succeeded the Julio-Claudians, he eventually reached the highest offices of the state. Ironically, his successful career only added poignancy to his plight as a dissident. The Romans practiced the ethics of reciprocity, which means that any social or political advancement was considered an imperial benefaction that in turn required loyalty and praise.

Tacitus was all too well aware of this. "I do not deny that my career was begun under Vespasian, was advanced by Titus and still more by Domitian; but those who profess honesty must write without partiality or hatred." The famous claim that he writes "without anger and partiality"—*sine ira et studio*—has won Tacitus the disapproval of modern critics who, referring to his odious political passions, denounce him for intellectual dishonesty. But one has to realize that in Tacitus's eyes tyranny was evil by definition and could not have been portrayed otherwise. For him, to display anger in describing the events of his time would have meant acquiescing in unwarranted fictions, ascribing to the tyrants atrocities of which they were innocent—to Tiberius, that he connived in the murder of his son Drusus, or to Nero, that he killed his wife, Poppaea Sabina, deliberately and not by accident. There were plenty of real atrocities to chronicle without having to make them up. For a historian or a public figure it is natural to hold strong political views. These are not necessarily the same thing as biases. So far as Tacitus was concerned, writes Professor Mellor, "bias stemmed only from what we would call today a tangible conflict of interest." In other words, Tacitus believed that to pronounce negatively on a Vespasian or a Domitian, despite the fact that he owed them the benefit of his career, was in the interest of history, even if it defied the expectations of his readers. This alone absolves him of the charge of duplicity and justifies his sense of pride.

At the center of Tacitus's work is the question of whether a good man can survive politically under evil rule. The early Imperial society, not unlike our own, suffered from a pervasive crisis of values. The code of behavior that Roman aristocrats practiced for centuries and called "ancestral customs" (*mos maiorum*) originally reconciled their sense of communal duty with individual dignity. It required an unquestioning commitment to the state as a sacred obligation and the display of piety. The same code also jealously guarded the individual's dignity and self-esteem, secured through mutual deference of the power players. This was what the senatorial nobility meant when it spoke of "liberty." Liberty was the freedom of civic initiative and pursuit of military glory: in other words, it was a political process that eschewed both anarchy and the tyranny of one-man rule.

The workings of the Roman Republic, based on the principles of electivity, collegiality, and accountability, made a political career compatible with moral fiber—at least, so far as the Romans understood it. With the advent of one-man rule, everything changed. The very idea of public service became equated with service to the emperor, who increasingly was seen as the incarnation of the state. Consequently, involvement in politics was justifiable only if the ruler him-

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self adhered to the "ancestral customs." By the same token, to serve a tyrannical Emperor became tantamount to enslavement, since complicity with a perpetrator of injustice was destructive of individual worth. The moral imperative thus simultaneously required senators to embark on a public career and to withdraw from it. Compelled to participate in proceedings largely devoid of practical import, senators found themselves oscillating between the extremes of dangerous secession and abject adulation.

Tacitus undertook to resolve the dilemma in his earliest work, a eulogy of his father-in-law, Agricola. This was the portrayal of an exemplary civil servant who, as Tacitus put it elsewhere, was capable of steering "a path, safe from intrigues and dangers, between abrasive obstinacy and disgusting groveling." But despite Tacitus's brilliant rhetoric and idealization of his hero, two things continue to stand out: first, that by his conquests in Britain, Agricola subjected a freedom-loving people to the rule of the tyrant Domitian and thereby further enhanced his power; and, second, that even Agricola's ostentatious loyalty would not have saved his life if his timely death—which itself seemed suspect—had not intervened. In the depth of his heart, the historian must have known that the ideal of the middle course is unrealizable. One still finds resonant a bitter statement that betrays the guilty conscience of an opportunist who was obliged to stand by helplessly as his friends were harassed and books were burnt in spectacles intended to "destroy the voice of the Roman people, the freedom of the Senate, and the accumulated knowledge of the human race." Tacitus continues: "Certainly, we showed a magnificent example of patience; as a former age had witnessed the extremes of liberty, so we witnessed the extreme of servitude, when the informer robbed us of the interchange of speech and hearing. We should have lost our memory along with our voice, had it been as easy to forget as to keep silence."

The major difficulty confronting scholars of Tacitus is the problem of sorting out facts from innuendo in his narrative. As Syme has shown, the factual content of Tacitus's history stands up very well. His attribution of motives is another matter. Tacitus was a superb psychologist who well understood the interstices of evil and depravity. But this does not necessarily mean that his treatment of individual behavior is always persuasive. A subtle rhetorician, Tacitus employed the whole range of verbal devices, from "pregnant omission" to "weighted alternative," to impress his own views on the reader. Of this last, my favorite example is the passage from his biography of Agricola, where he mentions in passing an officer who rushed in the midst of the slaughter "either out of bravery or because he failed to restrain his horse."

Professor Mellor dissects these tangled issues with consummate skill. His discussion felicitously combines scholarship with lucidity and is accessible to any interested reader. Along the way, he offers many insights, often encapsulated in telling details, into the ways of Tacitus and the world in which he lived. Although by no means averse to criticizing his subject when it is in order, Mellor nonetheless shows full appreciation of Tacitus's singular achievement and writes of it with a dramatic verve not unlike Tacitus's own. Having outlined the historian's life and his methods, he proceeds to examine him as moralist, psychologist, political analyst, and literary artist. The final chapter is dedicated to Tacitus's *Nachleben*. This is itself a remarkable story, encompassing the whole movement of *tacitismo* in the High Renaissance, the effect of Tacitus on Francis Bacon (who rated Tacitus above Plato and Aristotle as a moralist), and the defamation of Tacitus by Napoleon, the first notable "revisionist." According to Talleyrand's memoirs, Napoleon complained to Goethe and Wieland that Tacitus "finds criminal intention in the simplest acts; he makes complete scoundrels out of all the emperors to make us admire his genius in exposing them. . . . There are always prosecution, defendants, and people opening their veins in the bath. He speaks inter-

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minably of denunciations when he is the greatest denouncer himself."

In fine, Ronald Mellor has done much to resuscitate a very powerful shade from the ancient past, a shade which, one hopes, will continue as a presence. He has succeeded in re-defining Cornelius Tacitus and his work in terms of our own major existential concerns: "Tacitus understood the historian's paramount duty to preserve memory. Our own century has also turned to history to give meaning to man's ultimate inhumanity: to historicize genocide. We can think of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in the gulag, the historians of African enslavement and of the Holocaust. Tacitus is their precursor."

If the suit fits . . .

William Gaddis
A Frolic of His Own.
Poseidon, 586 pages, $25

reviewed by Brooke Allen

Judge Learned Hand once enjoined Oliver Wendell Holmes to "Do justice, sir, do justice!" Holmes replied, "That is not my job. It is my job to apply the law." One of the many lawyers in William Gaddis's new novel, *A Frolic of His Own*, says pretty much the same thing in the book's opening line: "Justice?—You get justice in the next world, in this world you have the law."

The very real distinctions between the concrete—if consistently malleable—American legal system and the abstract quality of justice is one of the uncomfortable jokes in Gaddis's wonderfully funny and pointed novel. As *The Recognitions* (1955) was "about" forgery and *JR* (1975) was "about" business, *A Frolic of His Own* is "about" the law, but as the plot expands and blossoms, the practice of the law becomes a paradigm for the culture at large in all its mad buffoonery.

The action, such as it is (entropy would be a fitter word), centers on several legal cases. Oscar Crease, a middle-aged history teacher at Lotusville Community College, has met with an accident. While he was hot-wiring his car, the vehicle (a Japanese Sosumi model) jumped from Park into Drive and ran him over. He is suing the manufacturers—or is it the insurance company? In fact, he's suing himself, but even Oscar can't keep it straight: "No I'm suing his, I mean my, I'm suing the insurance company for the owner of the car who are suing the, I think they're suing the dealer, the original dealer who's suing the car's maker . . ." He is also suing a film company for allegedly stealing the plot of his play, *Once at Antietam*, a wordy and unproducible work based on his grandfather's Civil War experiences and larded with undigested gobbets of Plato, Rousseau, and Camus. At the hands of the trashy movie director Constantine Kiester, it has been turned into an extravaganza of sex and violence called *The Blood in the Red White and Blue*.

Other folks are litigating, too. Oscar's girlfriend Lily plans to sue the doctor who provided her with leaky breast implants. His flighty friend Trish has two suits going simultaneously, one for fetal endangerment and the other to defend her abortion. And his father, a crusty federal judge, must unravel the most tangled web of all: in Tatamount, Virginia, a small boy's dog has wandered into a piece of postmodern public sculpture and the sculptor has stopped the village's attempt to rescue the animal by obtaining an injunction against dismantling the work of art. A number of subsequent suits and counter-suits arise from this situation, including the claim by the boy and his father to ownership of the dog's name, allowing them to cash in on some of the commercial flotsam that has followed in the wake of his plight: Free Spot! games, Free Spot! T-shirts, and even Hiawatha's Magic Mittens made of Genuine Simulated Spotskin ("Wear 'Em With The Fur Side Outside").

The passive center of this whirlwind is Oscar, who mulls obsessively over his lawsuits from a prone position in his wheelchair in the family mansion on Long Island. The Creases are "old money" and everything that

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the term implies: their house, potentially worth several million dollars in its virgin-wetland setting, is sagging, the porch could collapse at any moment (causing further lawsuits), the drive is strewn with rotting branches. The "family" consists of Oscar; his exasperated stepsister, Christina, perpetually frustrated in her efforts to introduce a little order into the household; Christina's husband, Harry Lutz, a stressed-out corporate lawyer who appears on occasional flying visits from Manhattan; and the dizzy Lily. They eat bland, WASP food—sole, boiled potatoes, vanilla pudding—and consume vast quantities of alcohol. Their vestigial WASP virtues have turned to vices, Oscar's cheapness for instance: "It's the way we were brought up," says Christina, "you get letters from him with the address pasted over some political fund raiser or cripple benefit of God knows what because he can't bear to see the postage wasted, you don't waste you don't want." Like others of his breed, Oscar sees himself as a civilized man, "maybe one of the last ones left."

One's first reaction is to laugh at Oscar's posturing, but his claim isn't an empty one. He is indeed a perfect example of what the civilized, literate man has become: helpless, self-obsessed, impotent, infantile. Brooding over his lawsuits, he has lost interest in sex, in food, in work, in the life of the mind. Lily, not quite such a dunce as she appears, asks why Oscar never reads any more. "I mean with all these books in there in the library and these ideas and people from books you're always talking about where all anybody reads around here is the paper and bills and the crosswords and junk mail and the dumb television but I mean books? reading a book?" The intellectual entropy has settled imperceptibly; there was a time, Oscar and Christina remember, when they read, played Mozart together, acted scenes from Shakespeare. But that time is distant, as distant as the hazily remembered days when Oscar, an innocent child, wandered in the wetlands outside, the shining Big-Sea-Water, and dreamed of Hiawatha. The natural world, as timeless and perfect as Walden Pond, is still outside his window; but Oscar no longer sees it.

While the disinterested intellectual has degenerated into the feeble figure of Oscar, the gap has been filled by people like Harry Lutz and Jawarharlal Madhar Pai, brilliant lawyers whose highly developed intellects serve to feed not the culture at large but only the all-consuming, self-perpetuating legal machine. The prize they seek is money rather than truth (Madhar Pai would "rather win than be right"); it is significant that the classic perfection of the Socratic dialogue survives only in the debased form of the legal deposition. The litigants themselves go to court not to seek justice but to soothe nebulous resentments or to affirm some fantasy they have about themselves. "The money's just a yardstick, isn't it," Christina says. "It's the only common reference people have for making other people take them as seriously as they take themselves." And Harry correctly qualifies Oscar's suit against Kiester as "not about injustice it's about resentment, it's resentment right from the start like his little canoe stuck in the mud and it poisons everything, blaming those faceless ogres out there instead of looking inside at the ogres we don't like to see."

All this is delivered in the style Gaddis has perfected over the last forty years, a barrage of dialogue with only the most sparing use of third-person narration, a shrill cacophony of voices. ("Where has Maid Quiet gone, nodding her russet hood?" Oscar quotes, appropriately enough.) Gaddis has called his technique "authorial absence," and this quality, together with his aggressive allusiveness and his use of dashes instead of quotation marks, has caused Gaddis often to be compared with Joyce; but that comparison is a spurious one. For one thing, as we should know by now, there is no such thing as authorial absence—not for Joyce, or for Gaddis, or for anyone. Except in the unlikely event that he is making an around-the-clock documentary film, like the Sixties epic about the Loud family, the artist is always present, choosing, discarding, com-

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posing the whole. What Gaddis does is very artfully achieve an *effect* of authorial absence with his skill at re-creating the unlovely cadences of casual speech.

In actuality, the author Gaddis resembles is not Joyce but rather the author most famous for asserting his presence, for imposing his sonorous and passionate voice upon every one of his stories: Dickens. Gaddis, like Dickens, writes "theme" novels, large-scale narratives that expose corrupt institutions at every level of society. Like Dickens, Gaddis always has a message; and as with Dickens it is often the proselytizer who drives the artist, rather than the other way round. Their inspiration is outrage, and they are not above haranguing when the outrage is hot enough. *A Frolic of His Own* bears an obvious resemblance to *Bleak House*. Both books portray the legal system as a parasite; Gaddis's view of the law as a conspiracy among lawyers is closely allied to *Bleak House*'s assertion that "the one great principle of the English law is to make business for itself"; and the American bar resembles Dickens's chancery, "which knows no wisdom but precedent." None of the lawsuits will ever achieve resolution, they will only continue to spout new branches. As Christina says, "It's not almost over. Somebody will win, somebody will lose, somebody will appeal and it starts all over again, doesn't it? Isn't that what happens?" And while both books seem to bemoan the breakdown of modern society, they in fact describe their societies' logical fruition. Dickens would have appreciated Judge Crease's ruling that "He may enjoy as much room in your hearts as you can afford Him, but God has no place in this court of law."

But to harp on Dickens or Joyce is to deny Gaddis the wonderful originality of his own achievement. Serious farce is a difficult genre. In his earlier novels Gaddis overshot the mark, making his point too forcefully and too repetitively. *The Recognitions* was a frustrating piece of work, bursting with erudition and insight but undisciplined, obscure, and marred by an arrogant disregard for the reader. With *JR* and *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985) he made some progress at curbing his tendency to polymathic excess and presenting unified pieces to work. Now, with *A Frolic of His Own*, he has achieved a work both of allusive richness and of discipline. Confining most of the action to the Crease house and most of the subject matter to the law has given him a central framework, and when he makes forays out of his legal territory they are not irrelevant but apposite to the whole.

And some of the forays are hilarious. While it is true that postmodern art critics make easy targets, it is still worth reading Gaddis's send-up of their jargon in an article on *Cyclone Seven*, the offending piece of sculpture:

> [The artwork stands] defiantly alone in its solitary monumentality, restless and dominating, even menacing in its threat of instability finding few echoes in the surrounding architecture, dwarfing the people with an intimidating authority but also a sense of informality and fun, toying with our anxieties of inclusion and exclusion in experiencing the full immensity and vertigo of space, tapping the explosive feelings trapped within its sense of emotional and physical accessibility, its suggestions of Christian sacrifices and suffering . . .

He also gets in a good jab, in the voice of a disgruntled lawyer, at the Broadway theater:

> Wad up your coat and jam it under the seat you've paid sixty dollars for where you can see exactly half the stage, hot as blazes and you can't cross your knees, the curtain goes up on a torrent of obscenity or some burntout star who's decided a revival of an old chestnut like your O'Neill there's a vehicle for immortality the minute he staggers onstage the audience explodes in applause and goes to sleep till intermission for the cigarette in the alley and that watery five dollar orange drink. End of the limited engagement the investors grab their tax breaks and their status as patrons of the arts one thing you can be sure of, they're having a better time up there on the stage than you are.

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> Whether it's spouting tits and ass or your O'Neill chestnut they're all just having a good time at your expense.

Gaddis can wander off on such tangents with a clear conscience since the novel's connective tissue is strong. The legal theme is underscored with numerous interrelating texts: the *Republic*, *The Social Contract*, the "old chestnut" *Mourning Becomes Electra*, the kitschy, childish, yet hauntingly innocent *Hiawatha*. The Oedipal theme, too, is always unobtrusively present, for Oscar's resentments as well as his longings for approval are all directed at his immovable father. (Musing on the lawsuit over *Once at Antietam*, Oscar mumbles portentously, "The play's the thing to catch the conscience of the king.")

The title of the novel is in fact a legal term: "a frolic of his own" means an activity taken on outside the scope of one's employment. Oscar is, of course, on a frolic of his own, and as insane as it is, Christina understands the impetus: "he's done something nobody's told him to do, nobody hired him to and gone off on a frolic of his own I mean think about it Harry. Isn't that really what the artist is finally about?" It is characteristic of Gaddis to light on a phrase that is official legal jargon yet at the same time so poetic, so delicate and fanciful.

The boys & their baby

Maurice Sendak We Are All
in the Dumps with Jack and Guy:
Two Nursery Rhymes with Pictures.
Michael di Capua Books/HarperCollins,
unpaged, $20

reviewed by Christopher Carduff

For the modern maker of picture books, it all goes back to Randolph Caldecott, the great Victorian illustrator who defined the form. Before 1878, when he published the first of his many fantasias on well-known nursery rhymes, there was no such thing as a children's picture book—at least not in the sense that picture-book artists like Maurice Sendak now understand the term. There were, instead, children's books with pictures, like the *Alice* books of Lewis Carroll and Sir John Tenniel, and albums of pictures with captions, like the alphabets and nonsense books of Edward Lear. Caldecott's books were something altogether different. In *Ride a Cock-Horse*, *The Queen of Hearts*, and a dozen or so other titles, the young artist devised books that, in both word and picture, were a unified design from front cover to back. Every word, every picture in a Caldecott book contributes to the story being told and to the book's overall aesthetic effect. In Caldecott, word and picture are, for the first time in children's literature, equal partners in storytelling: here, according to Sendak, is a juxtaposition, a counterpoint, a syncopation of text and illustration that simply hadn't happened before. "Words are left out," Sendak elaborates in his foreword to *The Caldecott Treasury* (1978), "but the picture says it. Pictures are left out—but the word says it." Caldecott is the source from which flowed not only the picture book but also, somewhat later, much of the comic strip and the sound cartoon.

The Caldecott-style picture book, says Sendak, is "a funny kind of juggling act," and the balls that the artist must keep in the air, from one page spread to the next, are the text and the pictures. The pictures—well, the pictures are very concrete, and they tell their own story, which at some points is the story the text is telling and at other points the story the illustrator finds "between the lines." That is why, Sendak says, the ideal picture-book text is ambiguous: "It has to let a number of meanings to shine through. It can't be a heavyhanded text that says little Johnny goes from left to right, because then the illustrator doesn't have any choice but to make little Johnny go from left to right. The text has to be . . . less obvious. You can have facts"—if your text is "Hey Diddle Diddle," you're stuck with a cat, a fiddle, a cow, a moon—"but the facts have to allow the artist to move the characters in any direction." It is

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for precisely this sort of rich ambiguity that Caldecott *did* in fact do a version of "Hey Diddle Diddle," and it is also why Sendak, following Caldecott's example, has been carrying on his own lifelong love affair with Mother Goose.

When Sendak was in his thirties and just starting to make his way as an artist for children, he often turned to the nursery-rhyme books of Randolph Caldecott for inspiration. He raided Peter and Iona Opie's definitive anthologies for lesser-known but evocative rhymes that he could elaborate upon in the manner of his master. His first Mother Goose book, the double-bill of *Hector Protector and As I Went Over the Water* (1965), was less an homage to Caldecott than a modern-dress impersonation of him: the graphic style may have been Sendak's own, but the humor, the pacing, the very manner of the visual storytelling was eerily that of the earlier artist. Then there was *Higglety Pigglety Pop!* (1967), a prose book with pictures that concluded with a series of full-page drawings—a sort of picture-book-within-a-book—that took the title nursery rhyme on a light-hearted romp. And also during this same mid-1960s period, Sendak produced the dummy for another Mother Goose book, but abandoned the project, perhaps because, in its similar pairing of two obscure nursery rhymes, it did not seem to the artist much of an advance on *Hector*.

"But the two verses stayed in my head," Sendak reports, and now, some thirty years later, they have at last been interpreted, not separately, as in *Hector*, but as one continuous narrative. *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* is Sendak's first picture book in over a decade. The text may again be Mother Goose, but the storytelling is anything but Caldecott. It isn't exactly Sendak, either, at least not the Sendak who, in *Where the Wild Things Are*, *In the Night Kitchen*, and *Outside Over There*, went deep into the consciousness of his child protagonists and brought back the truth about children's lives. *Dumps* is something new for Sendak, a book not so much about the interior world of childhood as about the adult world—the world of inefficient government, exploitative economics, and inequitable health care—and the horrors it can visit on the lives of the least powerful among us. It is, in short, an essay in present politics, and, like so much other political art—even, as in this case, political art created by an artist of genius—its very subtle aesthetic aims are at every turn undermined by a ham-fisted activist agenda.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Any discussion of Sendak's book must begin by quoting the rhymes he has chosen to illustrate.

> We are all in the dumps
> For diamonds are trumps
> The kittens have gone to St. Paul's!
> The baby is bit
> The moon's in a fit
> And the houses are built without walls.
>
> Jack and Guy went out in the rye
> And they found a little boy with one black eye.
> Come says Jack let's knock him on the head.
> No says Guy let's buy him some bread.
> You buy one loaf and I'll buy two
> And we'll bring him up as other folk do.

These two rhymes contain a handful of "facts"—kittens, baby, moon, Jack, Guy, bread, etc.—that Sendak, playing by Caldecott's rules, is honor-bound to work with. The rhymes are, however, ideally ambiguous for the artist's purposes, giving him near total freedom to supply setting, narrative, and meaning. And what is the story Sendak has found in these verses?

The book opens on a moonlit urban shantytown whose only human inhabitants are children. The locale is unmistakably New York City—the Brooklyn Bridge looms in silhouette across two of the page spreads—but it's a New York City of the mind, where Victorian-costumed street urchins coexist with the Empire State Building. Both of the title characters, like modern-day street kids, wear T-shirts with their names emblazoned on them, but Jack is otherwise dressed like

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Dickens's Artful Dodger—overcoat, rakish red top hat and all—while Guy, in his floppy broad-billed cap, seems to be modeled on Jackie Coogan, Chaplin's sidekick in *The Kid*. These two archetypal orphans and some dozen other homeless bit players all live out of trash cans, under corrugated cardboard, or in pup tents made of propped up bedsheets: "houses . . . built without walls." Around their feet mill countless smiling kittens, which, it soon becomes apparent, are something more to these kids than mere pets. These cats are full and equal citizens of Shantytown: here is a peaceable kingdom of little lions and lambs.

Yet even before the first scene-setting double-page spread—the story is told in twenty-seven such spreads, all of them in full-color and bled to the edges—we are introduced, on the half-title page, to the book's real hero, "the baby," a bald-headed, brown-skinned toddler. He is neediness personified, and he announces his presence with a soundless, open-mouthed howl. He knows only one word, which he will utter frequently throughout the book, and that word is "Help." When he approaches Jack and Guy, his palms up in supplication, Jack scowls and strongarms him. "Beat it!" he says.

Then all hell breaks loose. Two man-sized rats, close cousins of the Mouse King in Sendak's version of *Nutcracker*, raid the shantytown, making off with the baby and a bagful of kittens. Jack and Guy, looking on in horror, have an instant change of heart: they give chase and, fists clenched, threaten violence. The rats, cowardly but cunning, challenge them to a game of bridge: "Let's play for the kittens and the poor little kid!" But the game is rigged—"Diamonds are trumps"—and Jack and Guy are left hugging each other in grief as the rats haul off their winnings to St. Paul's Bakery and Orphanage. The baby makes a break—but in vain. Not only is he recaptured, but his eye is blackened and his head is bitten by one of the rats.

At this, the moon—a benign, concerned presence who has been watching the action unfold from overhead—can no longer remain uninvolved. "In a fit," he swoops down from the sky and picks up Jack and Guy in his mouth, taking them through a heaven full of angels and depositing them in a field of rye. There, in the very backyard of St. Paul's Bakery and Orphanage, the boys find the baby and two of the stolen kittens. The baby kisses Jack on the mouth, which enrages him—"Come says Jack let's knock him on the head!"—but Guy makes peace and soon the three children are approaching St. Paul's to buy bread for themselves. Meanwhile, up in the sky and over a series of page spreads, the moon's features become less human and more feline. Suddenly, the moon is in the field in the form of a giant white moon-cat, and Jack, Guy, and baby, riding the cat's back, are storming the bakery. The cat kills the rats and so frees the kittens, who are stacked in narrow shelf-like bunks, no doubt awaiting their extinction in the bakery's ovens. The cat again becomes the moon and takes the whole crew—Jack, Guy, baby, and kittens—for another tour of the heavens before returning them safely to a now sleeping shantytown.

In sketching the action of the book, I have told only part of Sendak's story, "the story for children," as it were. It's a good one, both thrilling and wonderfully well told, and its message is one of hope and reassurance. Yes, Sendak whispers to his youngest readers, you are helpless. You are a kitten, and you are a baby. But if your helplessness fills you with despair, remember this: it is also your ace in the hole. It's your helplessness that moves others who are stronger than you to protect you, to keep you out of harm's way. There is Evil in the world: that's a fact. It's powerful, and you are prey to it. But there is also Good. Trust in your elders, and in the heavens. You may never find your way out of the world you were born into, you may forever be stuck "in the dumps," but you'll survive. And if you're very lucky—as lucky as my baby—you may even love and be loved in return.

This, the *Jack and Guy* for children, is

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beautifully orchestrated, beautifully *animated*, wonderfully worked out in all its details. Unfortunately, Sendak here is unwilling simply to thrill and to reassure kids. Superimposed upon this *Jack and Guy* is another level of meaning, this one directed at Sendak's adult readers. This *Jack and Guy* does not whisper its message, it shouts it, quite literally in banner headlines. The shantytown children wrap themselves in newspapers for warmth, newspapers with stories titled FAMINE IN THE WORLD, LEANER TIMES MEANER TIMES, BABIES STARVE, CHAOS IN THE SHELTERS. Some of the newspapers speak of AIDS, and a couple of these children may have the disease: they are bald, and their baldness is not that of babies but of six-year-olds in chemotherapy.

Most of the papers comment ironically on the "unreal" aspects of New York real estate: FINE HOMES, VERY SMART LIVING FROM $79,000, MORTGAGE MONEY AVAILABLE FROM $50,000 TO $500,000, NO KIDS ALLOWED. The rats—the only discernible "adults" of the story—are not just cheats and thieves but, Sendak implies, somehow on the supply side of this real-estate madness. Before the rats play bridge with Jack and Guy, one of them builds a high-rise out of cards. When the boys are "trumped," Sendak's page spread is dominated by a looming gold-and-glass Trump Tower. At first I thought these rats were nothing more than Sendak's sly nod in the direction of Beatrix Potter's *Tale of Samuel Whiskers*, in which a pair of rats kidnap Tom Kitten with the aim of baking him in a roly-poly pudding. But Sendak's rats are driven by something more than Potter's naturalistic rattiness. These rats are clearly the embodiment of Reagan/Bush-era greed: they deceive, they steal, and as good capitalist baker-rats, they "make bread." Bread for them is a commodity, something to be exchanged for cash; for Jack and Guy and the baby, bread is the staff of life, something to be shared among themselves. When the boys liberate St. Paul's Bakery and Orphanage, their first act is to put up a sign that reads FREE BREAD TODAY!

The bakery, as viewed from the field of rye, is an ominous structure. It looks like a gray concrete bunker, out of which rise two squared-off smokestacks evocative of the twin towers of the World Trade Center. One of the towers vomits a coil of heavy black smoke, and suddenly the Trade Center becomes something truly frightful: a crematorium. The kittens, shelved like so much lumber in their narrow bunks, evoke memories of what Allied Forces photographers found upon entering the Nazi death camps. Sendak's bald message to his adult readers is grotesque: the rats among us—those who "make bread" but do not give it away, those who build tall buildings but don't provide adequate housing for the needy, those who cheat and steal from the powerless to make themselves more powerful—are no better than Nazis. Their practices are genocidal, and their victims are the poor of the next generation.

But beyond all this, we adult readers are meant to realize, the rats are also *us*, members of the affluent, literate class, people who can afford twenty bucks for a picture book for our own kids but who never give a thought to the homeless, parentless kids of our cities. Sendak is appealing to the bleeding heart that beats deep within the chest of even the most rat-like among us, reminding us with a Brechtian stridency that all that we have—our square meals, our "fine homes," our healthy bank accounts—we have only at the expense of have-nots. It is not insignificant that the newspaper that these children wrap themselves in is not just any newspaper: it is, quite explicitly, *The New York Times*. Neither is it insignificant that last September, when it came time to promote his new book, Sendak placed a tie-in cover not with *The Horn Book* or *Ladybug*, not even with *Parents* magazine or *Parade*, but with Tina Brown's *New Yorker*. Now *that's* laying down the poison where the rats can find it!

All of this would mean much less, of course, if *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* were not the work of our most accomplished picture-book artist but rather

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the product of, say, some cartoonist from the *Raw* school of sociopolitical commentary. We expect Nazi rats and Holocaust imagery from Art Spiegelman, Sue Coe, and those other shock-cartoonists who, insecure about working in a "lowly" medium best suited to Supermen and Mickey Mice, have been working hard and with a good deal of success to gain some respect, or at least some notoriety, for the comics. Indeed, it is hard to imagine *Jack and Guy* without the precedent of *Maus*, Spiegelman's Holocaust epic in comic-book form, the great best seller of a couple of years ago and a special Pulitzer honoree. If Spiegelman can successfully haul a "kiddie" medium like the comic book into the adult arena, why can't Sendak do the same for the picture book?

He can, of course, and who's to say he shouldn't? But if he does so, he should at least be honest about what it is he's attempting, both with himself and with his audience, and in *Jack and Guy* he hasn't been. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* is a comic book, but it doesn't pretend to be anything but an *adult* comic book: it isn't *Walt Disney's Comics & Stories* for one readership and *Survival in Auschwitz* for another. Sendak's have-it-both-ways hybrid—on one level a children's book, on another an illuminated op-ed piece—makes me uneasy. Although it speaks eloquently to its youngest readers, in the end it really isn't for them. It's a stealth book: it comes into the house through the nursery window but is intended for Mom and Dad's nightstand.

Caldecott never condescended to kids by writing over their heads and haranguing their parents; Sendak never has until now. Perhaps it is time for Sendak to part company with the conventions of the child's picture book and write his own *Maus*. But for my taste—and for the sake of his young audience—I hope that he doesn't. I hope he returns to his Caldecott collection, relearns the lesson of the master, and rededicates himself to unadulterated children's literature. What our children need are great artists who respect them, who address their concerns with humor and the utmost moral seriousness, and who don't pander to the expectations of critics and contemporaries by taking on so-called adult themes. They need the unique artist who created *Wild Things*, *Night Kitchen*, and *Outside Over There*, and who devised the brilliant children's book at the heart of *Jack and Guy*. They don't need yet another editorial cartoonist baiting greedy, self-centered, uncommitted grownups on their behalf.

Thistles & thorns

Hugh MacDiarmid Selected Poetry.
Edited by Alan Riach & Michael Grieve.
Introduction by Eliot Weinberger.
New Directions, 289 pages, $25

reviewed by Michael Glover

Scotland has been at war with England since the thirteenth century; but since the eighteenth, the most bitter battles have been fought between individuals wielding paper swords. The last time the Scots and the English came to physical blows *en masse* was at Culloden in April 1746. It was a ruthless occasion: the Highland clans were routed by the forces of the Hanoverian Duke of Cumberland, and the fanciful aspirations of the Stuarts were put to flight once and for all. Bonnie Prince Charlie himself, of course, slippery as an eel, escaped to France, where he survived until 1788—until, that is, the very eve of the French Revolution, which he may have scented (with some disgust) in his dying nostrils. After Culloden, the Highlands were fortified; the wearing of tartan was strictly forbidden; the episcopalian clergy was severely punished; and the common people suffered terrible hardships—as common people tend to do when their betters come to blows over matters of high principle.

But the humiliations suffered by the native languages of Scotland—she had two: Gaelic and lowland Scots or Lallans—began in earnest much earlier; earlier even than the uniting of the two crowns of England and

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Scotland in 1603. In the sixteenth century, the Geneva Bible was translated into English—but not into Scots, which until that time had been a great literary language (as readers of Henryson and Dunbar will be aware), equal in status to its more southerly cousin. Both English and Scots were, of course, dialects of Anglo-Saxon. The decision by the Scottish Reformers to use that English text in their churches had profound cultural consequences. When the crowns of England and Scotland were united, the Scottish king, James I, and his entire court moved south, thus hastening along that creeping process of anglicization—the anglicization of manners and the anglicization of letters.

By the time of Robert Burns, who died in 1796, and in spite of serious efforts to revive the Scots vernacular in the eighteenth century, Scots itself had been reduced to the status of a mere dialect, and Scotland, by the Act of Union of 1707, to that of a province. Burns wrote in the English of his itinerant schoolmaster, John Murdoch, a man appointed by Burns's own father, a poor tenant farmer, to give his son a proper education in Milton and the Augustans; but he also wrote in the Scots that was handed down to him by his own mother, an illiterate woman with a wealth of Scots songs and ballads in her head, and from whom he discovered just how rich and vigorous that dying tongue had once been. Which poems are the better? Are we to opt for the smooth-sliding syllables of Burns's English or the raw, rasping, polysyllabic fervor of Lallans? The first was learnt, the second felt on the pulses.

This is the context in which we must read the poetry and prose of Hugh MacDiarmid, Scotland's most energetic man of letters in our own century, whose *Selected Poetry* has just been published. The *Selected Poetry*, brought out here by New Directions, is but part of a much larger enterprise undertaken by Carcanet Press, the English publisher of poetry and avant-garde fiction. Carcanet's series *MacDiarmid 2000* promises to bring the whole of MacDiarmid's huge canon into print by the end of the century under the general editorship of the scholar Alan Riach, who is being assisted in his task by MacDiarmid's son, Michael Grieve. "Grieve?" you may ask. "But why Grieve and not MacDiarmid?" Thereby hangs a tale.

The poet Hugh MacDiarmid was born Christopher Murray Grieve in the small Borders town of Langholm in 1896. For the man who was in the habit of listing "anglophobia" as one of his chief hobbies in *Who's Who*, he had had a narrow escape indeed. It was a mere six miles to the English border. His father was a postman, and MacDiarmid had little by way of formal education, though he was to remain throughout his life a voracious reader of anything and everything. In fact, those who are poised to dismiss him as a pretentious windbag often preface their remarks by describing him as a "working-class autodidact."

MacDiarmid began his career as a mature poet by writing finely crafted, and often very short and exquisite, Scots lyrics. They were collected in such volumes as *Sangschaw* (1925) and *Penny Wheep* (1926), and the short lyric was to be a mode of writing at which he excelled throughout his life. MacDiarmid's greater energies were, however, reserved for much more grandiose schemes, works into which he seems, at times, to have wished to pour nothing less than the sum of all human knowledge. The first poem-cum-brain-marathon of this kind, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926), is generally regarded by the critics to be his most enduring legacy.

A drunken man is making his weary way homeward, having tippled for an hour or two before setting out on his journey. The poem is an extended act of rumination upon the nature of the self; the nature of the poet's quest; the destiny of Scotland and the fate of her languages and literature. At times, it reads like drunken raillery; at other points—as when the poet is in imaginative colloquy with that great kindred soul, Dostoevsky—it becomes seriously sober-suited and high-minded within the mildly constraining scope of its stirring visionary rhetoric. MacDiarmid dismisses the preten-

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sions of that emasculated tongue, English, with characteristic gusto at every end and turn—there is nothing more pernicious, it seems, than "the wandering abscess of the English influence." The poem is written in Scots, and it needs a good deal of glossing for the reader entirely unacquainted with that language. Happily, MacDiarmid was aware of this problem, and provided his own glossary of difficult or abstruse locutions at the foot of each page.

There is, however, an additional impediment to appreciation here, and it is something which does not mar the Scots writing of Burns to the same degree at all. When Burns was writing in the second half of the eighteenth century, the Scots language was in terminal decline, and yet it was still a remembered, if not a used and living, language. By the 1920s, that language had to be not merely revived but essentially reborn—and this business of artificial resuscitation became a central plank in MacDiarmid's energetic efforts to bring about a Scottish Literary Renascence.

Why bother, though? Because, MacDiarmid argued, with the death of the Scots language the "bainmost thochts" (innermost thoughts) of a people had died. How could a people be expected to speak, act, or write with any authenticity if the tongue in which they were obliged to express themselves was that of the usurper? The rebirth of the Scots languge would go hand in hand with the birth of a new Scots consciousness, a new Scots *nationalism* . . . By the end of the 1920s, MacDiarmid had helped to found the party that later transformed itself into the Scottish National Party. A feverish interest in lexicography had been transmogrified into a program of political derring-do.

Unfortunately, no sooner had MacDiarmid set himself the task of expressing himself fully in Scots than he found himself hampered by the lack of an expansive vocabulary, and so in order to find one, he began to pillage the treasures to be found in old dictionaries, and especially those buried deep in Jamieson's great *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language*. The man that

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had embarked upon this great enterprise went by the humble name of Christopher Murray Grieve. When the business was successfully completed and the great poem written, Hugh MacDiarmid stood before us, a literary pen name that seemed to embody everything that Scotland had been at its vigorous best—and might yet again be.

The prophet, sad to say, was not honored in his own country. MacDiarmid's Scots readers, English speakers to a man, were perplexed. Who owned this synthetic language, this tissue of willful obscurities? they asked. And what were they to do with it? MacDiarmid sighed and rent his shirt. For if there was one nation that MacDiarmid had an even greater contempt for than the English, it was undoubtedly his own: that people of his who deemed "their ignorance their glory"; who had willingly accepted the terms of slavery that the English had handed down to them; and who had no capacity to think anything other than their own "dour provincial thochts."

It was during these turbulent years that a famous literary skirmish took place between MacDiarmid and the Orcadian poet Edwin Muir. It was Muir's treacherous opinion that the only authentic language for Scottish poetry was English, and that anyone who thought or wrote otherwise would be engaged in willful acts of antiquarianism—and what could be more inauthentic than that? Thousands of words were spilt in this fierce quarrel; conflicting voices rose to a terrifying pitch—as must necessarily happen within the compass of a small house such as Scotland is. And then came the biggest surprise of all—equal, it seemed, to the greatest act of *lèse majesté* that the worst of MacDiarmid's opponents might have perpetrated. Hugh MacDiarmid himself began to write poetry in English. Why?

It was a simple matter of words, words, words. MacDiarmid always needed to have lots of them at his beck and call, and many of the words for the ideas that he wished to pour into his great schematic poems had simply not existed when Scots was breathing her last as a living language. What of words scientific and philosophical, for example? And what of words to describe matters biological—or the excitements of the upcoming science of eugenics? Jamieson, for all that he may have been an eighteenth-century polymath, had known nothing of those sorts of things, of course. Many of the best modern words had been coined in English, and that was a fact of life, unbudgeable as any monolith, albeit an obnoxious one.

And so from the turn of the 1930s, MacDiarmid blocked his ears to the cries of self-betrayal and began once again to write in English (his neo-Georgian juvenilia had been written in English too). And then there followed that great wave of long poems—*To Circumjack Cencrastus or The Curly Snake* (1930), *In Memoriam James Joyce* (1955), and the *Three Hymns to Lenin* (collected in 1957), for example. One of the three epigraphs to *Circumjack Cencrastus* gives a flavor of that poem's vocabulary—and of its overweening intellectual ambitions: "A gulf divides the exaltations of the mystics from the tachypraxia of the micro-splanchnic hyperthyroidics or the ideo-affective dissociations of the schizothymes. DE SANCTIS." Quite.

MacDiarmid had a horror of provincialism—the Scots curse—and he was determined throughout his life not only to prove himself an intellectual who had the capacity to take a wider and more exalted view of human knowledge than his fellow men but also to establish his credentials as an internationalist. And it was this attraction to the idea of an international literary elite, a brotherhood of intellectual scribblers, who would possess the collective means to make an impact upon the world of real men, that gave Communism such an appeal—and something else too. MacDiarmid, who like his confrère Ezra Pound was a haphazard and eccentric scholar, managed to establish to his own satisfaction (and the arguments to substantiate this belief are presented in a long introduction to an anthology of Scots verse entitled *The Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry*) that Scots civilization had had its beginnings in Georgia of all places; and, by

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an extraordinary accident of history, Georgia was the very spot where a great and inspirational leader of men had also had his humble origins:

> . . . And think of the Oriental provenance of
> the Scottish Gael,
> The Eastern affiliation of his poetry and his
> music,
> . . . . . .
> And the fact he initiated the idea of civilization
> That to-day needs renewal at its native source
> Where, indeed, it is finding it, since Georgia,
> Stalin's native country, was also the first home
> of the Scots.
> ("Direadh III")

Clearly, the capacity of that Scots genius to re-assert itself could only be helped by an early association with the international brotherhood of Communism. A truncated version of the haphazard story of MacDiarmid's political affiliations would run as follows: having been a co-founder of the National Party of Scotland, he was expelled from it for his Communist sympathies in 1933. Later still, he was expelled from the Communist Party for being a Nationalist. He rejoined the Communist Party in the wake of the Soviet Union's invasion of Hungary in 1956. This is eccentricity operating at a very high—if not a heady—level indeed. It seems entirely appropriate, therefore, that one of his last public honors (awarded to him in 1972) should have been his appointment to the Governorship of the Academy of Pure Malt Whisky.

The *Selected Poetry* gives us some of the best and some of the worst of MacDiarmid—it seems scarcely to matter as long as it is all authentic work by the master. This may seem to indicate that there is a present mood amongst some members of the Scots literary fraternity not only to pardon his misjudgments and inconsistencies, but also to explain away much of his blustering rhetoric by resorting to the unconvincing argument that what may seem like windy rhetoric to the uninitiated is merely part of a long and entirely honorable tradition of public, declamatory verse—"my god, we Scots are no solipsistic navel-gazers!" The fact is that, though often a shy and gentle man in private, MacDiarmid gloried in a public persona of the perpetual combatant—effusive, scornful. It was his expressed wish to make an art form out of vituperation—"my job, as I see it," he once wrote, "has never been to lay a tit's egg, but to erupt like a volcano, emitting not only flame but a lot of rubbish." And, true to his own estimation, that vituperative nature which held him in its thrall also caused him to give birth to much that was clumsy, ugly, ill-formed; to be silly, pedantic, naïve, and absurdly pretentious. And yet, amidst all this bluster, there is still some great poetry to be reckoned with. There is no swashbuckling here, for example:

> I met ayont the cairney
> A lass wi' tousie hair
> Singin' till a bairnie
> That was nae langer there.
>
> Wunds wi' warlds to swing
> Dinna sing sae sweet,
> The licht that bends owre a' thing
> Is less ta'en up wi't.
> ("Empty Vessel")

And what is the present status of the native languages of Scotland? Anyone seeking a relatively easy answer to this difficult question should consult the magnificent *Atlas of the World's Languages*, which was published by Routledge this spring. The atlas, a hugely ambitious project of the kind that MacDiarmid would have approved, represents a first attempt to map every living language on this earth, of which there are said to be approximately six thousand. Half of them will have disappeared within a hundred years from now.

Turning to the map of Scotland on page 254, we discover that she is said to have two living languages, Gaelic (spoken by 88,892 people, though only 477 of them are monolingual in Gaelic), which survives along the West Coast and in the Western Isles, and

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English. Lallans simply no longer exists.

And yet anyone fortunate enough to have seen a copy of *The New Makars* (Mercat Press, Edinburgh), an anthology of contemporary poetry in Scots published at the end of 1991, would have read the following statement from its publisher:

> Tom Hubbard's brief introduction is a major literary document in its own right. In making the case for Scots, he also lays the groundwork for a debate which is essential to the future of Scotland as a culture and a nation. Scots has survived long after being pronounced dead by—now deceased—pundits; it flourishes despite the lack of official status and the assaults of snobbery with ignorance. This collection celebrates Scots and reclaims it for world literature . . . To mark our sense of the importance of this publication, we have planned an unprecedented series of launches in centres throughout Scotland and beyond—including one in London, and one, on a date yet to be fixed, in Luxembourg!

Alive or dead, the ghost of MacDiarmid is with us still; still browbeating the English public (in the English language) on its shameful neglect of that distant, estranged (if not deceased) cousin. Thank God, therefore, that it was an English publisher who undertook the mightily expensive task of making available to us the Collected Works of Hugh MacDiarmid. It is the very least one could have done in these perplexing circumstances.

Big little lady

Joan D. Hedrick
Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life.
Oxford University Press,
507 pages, $35

reviewed by Marc M. Arkin

Imagine a large New England family, headed by an arriviste patriarch endowed with overweening ambition and an aggressive sense of tribal loyalty. Spurred by paternal aspirations, each of his sons, in turn, enters public life, with greater or lesser degrees of success and not without the occasional hint of scandal. Each of his daughters either marries well or spends her life engaged in good works. Never far from the public eye, marked by intense clannishness, the family involves itself in every manner of contemporary liberal cause, particularly taking up the rights of black people. At the same time they display an innate cultural conservatism and distrust of foreign influences. The Kennedys of Massachusetts? No, the nineteenth-century Beechers of Connecticut.

It was an article of faith among New England Puritans that the line of godly children "doth . . . for the most part run through the loyns of godly parents. . . . And there are some Families that the Lord hath Chosen above others and therefore poureth his spirit upon the offspring in such families successively." By these standards, the loins of Lyman Beecher were godly indeed. Born to a New Haven blacksmith and raised by a Guilford farmer, Lyman Beecher clawed his way into the New England clerical elite with a combination of raw ambition, well-honed disputational skills, a homely sense of humor, and an uncanny nose for the direction of popular sentiment. Of his eleven children who survived to adulthood, all seven boys followed his example and entered the ministry; three of his four daughters became prominent figures in their own right.

Of these Beecher offspring, the one best known to twentieth-century audiences is Harriet, who is better recognized as Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: "the little lady who," as Abraham Lincoln famously put it, "wrote the book that started the great war." In her own day, Stowe was an immensely popular and prolific writer of sketches, occasional pieces, short stories, and novels. It is the thesis of Joan Hedrick, in her new, self-consciously feminist biography, that the trajectory of Mrs. Stowe's career exemplifies the transformation of nineteenth-century literature from a thing of the parlor to a profession, a

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transformation in which women writers were—needless to say, given the author's perspective—shortchanged. According to Hedrick, Stowe's voice and popularity dated back to an age before male-dominated criticism divided literature into high and low culture. Apparently, for Hedrick, this development—and not any inherent limitations in the *oeuvre*—explains the continuing eclipse of Mrs. Stowe's literary reputation. Unfortunately, in biography, as in life, treating individuals as archetypes can only lead to disappointing results.

Harriet Beecher was born in 1811, in Litchfield, a stronghold of the informal Connecticut aristocracy that united Congregationalist piety with Federalist politics. She died in 1896, in Hartford, at the end of the Gilded Age. In between, she participated in virtually every significant geographic, social, and political movement of nineteenth-century America. As Hedrick rightly observes, Harriet Beecher Stowe had a knack for being in the right place at the right time.

Early recognized as a gifted child—in an oft-quoted passage, Lyman wrote "Harriet is a great genius—I would give a hundred dollars if she was a boy & [her younger brother] Henry a girl—She is as odd as she is intelligent & studious"—Harriet passed her girlhood in the shadow of her older siblings. Then, at the age of thirteen, she moved to Hartford, where she was first a pupil and then a teacher in her eldest sister Catharine's innovative Hartford Female Seminary. The Seminary's mission was to bring the same rigorous intellectual and moral instruction to young women that young men received at the college level. It was only one of many Beecher projects aimed at seizing the cultural initiative for their own brand of New England values and, not incidentally, for themselves.

By the age of twenty-one, Harriet appeared to be settling into a contented life as a spinster school teacher. In 1832, however, the Beechers, like so many other Yankees, were seized by the "westering fever" and moved to the frontier boom town of Cincinnati, Ohio. While Lyman assumed the presidency of the ill-fated Lane Seminary, Harriet was to help Catharine establish her Western Female Academy. This time, Catharine's mission was slightly different: to train Protestant school teachers for battle against the popish threat that Lyman envisioned massing in the Mississippi Valley.

Although the school foundered for lack of money and "follow through," Harriet thrived in the transplanted Connecticut society she found waiting for her. She joined the Semi-Colon Club, a local literary group. Within a few years, the seemingly unmarriageable Harriet had found a husband in the person of a professor of the Old Testament, Calvin Stowe, and a vocation in the form of literature. From 1833 through the mid-1840s, she wrote regularly for a variety of publications, including *Godey's Lady's Book*, *The Western Monthly*, and *The New York Evangelist*. Her literary output was all the more crucial since her family's fragile finances came to depend on her income.

The demands of marriage weighed heavily on Harriet—six babies in twelve years. In addition, she appears to have inherited the Beecher tendency to what the family called the "hypo," or, in modern terms, depression. After a near-fatal bout of cholera, Harriet entered the yeasty subculture of alternative medicine. Her first such venture was a year's residence—Catharine in tow—at Dr. Wesselhoeft's fashionable water cure in Brattleboro, Vermont, an establishment that featured the therapeutic measure of wrapping its patients in woolen blankets every morning at four o'clock and then immersing them in a cold bath. Over the ensuing decades, Harriet became an enthusiast for every available medical fad from the movement cure and electricity treatments to the rest cure. Unlike the conventional medicine of the day, which regularly prescribed large doses of calomel (mercurous chloride), at least these alternative cures were relatively harmless and provided some respite from household cares.

Come 1850, having weathered financial

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crises, pro-slavery rioting, the suicide of her brother George, the heresy trial of her father, and the loss of a much-beloved child during her Cincinnati years, Harriet found herself back in New England. Calvin moved his family first to Bowdoin College and, soon after, to the theologically conservative Andover Seminary. Family lore records that, while in Maine, Harriet received a letter from her sister-in-law, urging her to write something in response to the newly passed Fugitive Slave Law. In 1851, Harriet Beecher Stowe's first novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly*, began running as a serial in *The National Era*; it continued for nearly a year, and in 1852 the collected episodes were published in book form. The book was an overnight international best seller; it earned its author the unheard-of sum of $10,000 within three months.

Harriet Beecher Stowe had become a wealthy and influential public figure; she was to remain one for the rest of her life. The various wings of the antislavery movement vied for her support, but she remained largely aloof. Her activities, rather, were mainly directed to defending her own veracity in *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853) and to producing a second, dismally unsuccessful, antislavery novel, *Dred* (1856).

Instead of becoming a professional abolitionist, Stowe settled into life as a literary personage. She visited Europe several times and wrote a well-received travel book, *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands* (1854). In addition, as the Civil War ground on, Stowe sensed the rich national market for nostalgia. She began pumping out a steady stream of sketches, articles, and occasional pieces—as well as several novels—based on a sentimentalized picture of her New England childhood in the land of steady habits.

After the war was over, as the nation entered the Gilded Age, Stowe found herself a doyenne of Hartford society, eventually establishing a household next door to Samuel Clemens. In 1867, she joined yet another Yankee migration, wintering in Florida from then until 1884 when Calvin's ill-health made the journey south impossible. All this—plus subsidizing her large and feckless family—cost a great deal of money, and while Stowe was an astute businesswoman, she was also a congenital spendthrift. As a result, she remained a slave to her pen, even while counseling the joys of the unencumbered life to her readership.

By the early 1870s, faced with a changing marketplace—and, possibly, one oversaturated with her works—Stowe threw herself into another cause. Perhaps she hoped to relive her past triumph with a new issue. While the cause—women's rights—was understandable enough, the vehicle—an effort to vindicate Lord Byron's first wife by exposing his incestuous relationship with his half-sister—seems inexplicable from a twentieth-century perspective. It was also a grave miscalculation from which Stowe's personal reputation never fully recovered. Although she returned to the sentimental subjects that had established her career, her voice no longer carried the moral weight of earlier years. After the late 1870s, she wrote little and withdrew from public life.

The author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* presents an unusually difficult subject for a biographer. A complex and deeply reserved woman, she admitted that she rarely expressed her feelings either in person or in her seemingly emotional correspondence. At the same time, the extraordinary amount of written material she—and the rest of the Beechers—generated makes even the organization of a biography a monumental undertaking. The difficulties are further compounded by Stowe's failure to date her letters and the fact that her husband, Calvin, may have had the worst handwriting in recorded history.

Hedrick, in fact, naïvely wonders that the Beechers wrote and preserved so many letters, even while failing to observe that some were exchanged between family members living under the same roof. Other, perhaps more cynical, chroniclers of the Beecher family have suggested that this epistolary bent was part and parcel of the family's tireless self-promotion. They were always writ-

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ing—and hoarding—with an eye toward their place in history. Indeed, they made a virtual cottage industry of family biographies, culminating in the *Autobiography of Lyman Beecher* (1863-65), a collection of correspondence and other documents compiled by the family when Lyman was in his early eighties.

Naïveté, it turns out, is the dominant characteristic of Hedrick's book. Her narrative is a palimpsest of every theme in American Studies journals for the last twenty years. For example, the reader is treated to overlays of civic republicanism (educating women for "republican motherhood"), early feminism (the rise of the cult of domesticity), middle feminism (the development of female bonding in all-women's institutions), and late feminism (contrasting the "hierarchy" of "patriarchy" with the web-like connections of women's lives). Hedrick tries them on and sets them aside with an alacrity worthy of the Beechers, themselves no strangers to the vagaries of intellectual fashion.

Driven by her rather pedestrian feminism, Hedrick oversimplifies the entire Beecher family and the world through which they moved. For example, she repeatedly characterizes slavery as a "patriarchal" institution, presumably (although the reasoning is never made very clear) because it is "hierarchical" in nature, and, as a result, she is reduced to arguing that "class" blindness led Harriet to depend on the labor of servants, including slaves rented from their Southern masters, in order to run her household and secure time to write. The same "class" blindness explains Stowe's patronizing attitude toward the real-life black people she met.

Further, Hedrick accepts at face value the Beechers' own mythology about their participation in the antislavery movement. Unfortunately, the family folklore achieved its canonical form only after "immediatism" and participation in the underground railroad had become a badge of political authenticity. Instead, the Beechers were extremely slow to jump on the antislavery bandwagon and did so only late and reluctantly. These were complicated and intelligent people faced with what they perceived as a series of unpalatable choices and it does no justice to oversimplify them.

Hedrick's remarkable naïveté even extends to her treatment of personal relations. Hedrick repeatedly asserts that the Stowes enjoyed a "companionate marriage"—an institution supposedly new to the nineteenth century—and that Calvin Stowe was deeply supportive of his wife's literary career. As a result, although she presents material that indicates serious friction in the marriage, Hedrick takes at face value the Stowes' repeated pledges to recommit themselves to each other—usually contained in letters written during the prolonged periods of separation that marked the relationship. Hedrick also overlooks the influence that Calvin, a theological liberal well-acquainted with the emerging German historical biblical criticism, had on Harriet's religious views. At the same time, she misses a chance to make at least one feminist point; if the persnickety, dyspeptic Calvin Stowe was the best husband Harriet could hope for, things were rough indeed in the nineteenth century.

The book gains momentum in its account of events after the Civil War. Here Hedrick hits her stride, analyzing the decline of Stowe's reputation in the face of the professionalization—read "masculinization"—of literature. Nevertheless, the narrative is essentially flawed. It is oddly disjointed and, at times, difficult to follow. Dates are vague. Books written after the Civil War appear unbidden in discussions of pre–Civil War trends. Minor characters float in and out, sometimes identified by their Christian names, sometimes by their pen names. Even Harriet's own children drift through without continuity. At one point, having quit school, Charley Stowe puts to sea with his parents' reluctant blessing; he next appears, without explanation, as a student at Harvard.

Hedrick also clutters her narrative with a fair amount of extraneous material ap-

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parently required by her feminist agenda; here, a biography of an unrelated character to illustrate the limitations of nineteenth-century women's lives, there, a purple set piece on the "West of the male imagination." In addition, there are frequent breaks in the narrative to summarize the proper feminist interpretation of the material, just in case the reader should have missed it the first time through.

This clutter only makes more remarkable the shallow consideration given Stowe's religious development, by any other estimate a central factor in her life. Hedrick's treatment of Stowe's religious life is largely limited to superficial reports of religious crises and to vague references to the destructive effect of religious "perfectionism." Harriet's flirtation with the Episcopal Church and fascination with Catholicism are mentioned but never explained. In fact, the reader would be hard-pressed to learn that, whatever his faults, Lyman Beecher was actually a theological liberal in his day and that he was persecuted for it during his time in Cincinnati. Or that his children were leaders in the Victorian movement toward a more Christocentric piety, informed by a sentimentalized vision of the family and a feminized Jesus.

Ultimately, despite the wealth of material, Hedrick's book is strangely unpersuasive and bloodless; it is difficult not to compare it unfavorably with Kathryn Kish Sklar's 1973 *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity*, which took on much the same task with complete success. Stowe is ripe for a biography centered on so-called "women's issues." Her self-conscious romanticization of the family and the very household tasks she sought to escape is material for a fascinating study. The important thing is, as Cromwell said, to paint the portrait "warts and all."

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Notebook

Richard Wilbur: a tribute

by John Simon

Poetry, unlike prose, is writ small, but looms large. It is the job of prose to make large things, such as war and peace, comprehensible to us. Even if Fabrice del Dongo could not grasp the enormous battle he was immersed and submerged in, Stendhal could, and could convey its meaning to us. Edith Sitwell was wrong to praise her more talented fellow poet Roy Campbell as follows: "He believed, as I believe, that it is equally infamous to massacre priests, nuns, Jews, peasants, and aristocrats." That is a large truth, and does not require the services of poetry to give it stature. But the death of a toad, which seems minuscule, does need a poet to bring it home to us. And this, along with so much else, is what Richard Wilbur has brought into every home by special delivery.

Half centuries, like centuries, do not pay much attention to the calendar. For the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, it was the year 1914 that marked the start of "the real twentieth century." But if the first half of our century was late in coming, the second, beginning with the end of World War II, was roughly five years early. And when, in that to us so important second half, the dust of proximity settles, it will be seen that the pure champions of poetry were not the maniacal Robert Lowell or the equally mad and even more marginal John Berryman; not the richly loud-mouthed Adrienne Rich or that robustious roisterer Theodore Roethke; nor yet, for all his brilliance as a critic, Randall Jarrell.

No. It will, I think, come down to four others, three of whom are no longer with us. Death has claimed Elizabeth Bishop and James Wright. The third, James Dickey, has lost his resonance with age. The fourth of them, and very possibly the greatest, is being honored here tonight.[1] It is Richard Wilbur, and one of the proofs of his being a true poet is how little any of us knows about his life. Other poets regaled us with their sexual athletics, record consumption of toxic substances, spectacular nervous breakdowns, sojourns in sanatoriums, cloistered or trumpeted homosexuality, or, best of all, suicides. Richard Wilbur, however, made it not on a life that is purple, but on poetry that is read. His biography remains private; his bibliography belongs to all.

Dick Wilbur came to Harvard directly from World War II, wearing, or seeming to wear, clothes that were hand-me-downs from the army. As a Harvard student and sporadically published rhymer, I knew just enough to recognize a superior talent and envy it. So I promptly wrote a pasquinade entitled "The Khaki Poet," whose point, such as it was, was that everything about Wilbur was khaki: his clothes, his hair, his complexion, his verse. While this may have

1 The first part of this essay was delivered as an introduction to Richard Wilbur's receiving the National Arts Club's literary award, February 2, 1994. The second part is what I would also have liked to say had circumstances permitted it.

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been true about his garb, it was garbage about the rest. My mockery also zeroed in on his having no enemies, as if being universally liked and admired were an offense against art. I now think it a thrilling proof that one need not be a brawler to be kissed by the muse, and that good character does not downgrade you in the *gradus ad Parnassum*.

A few years later, I was a student in Professor Samuel Chew's course on Victorian literature, in which Dick Wilbur was the grader. As I always took one course too many, so as to be able to flunk one with relative impunity, I earned a D in Victorian Literature, which had the longest reading list. Nevertheless, being myself a brawler, I took my protest to Mr. Wilbur. Walking up and down Harvard Yard with me, he explained, patiently and peripatetically, how on the mere paucity and brevity of my written answers I could not—quantitatively—have received a passing grade. The gentleness, persuasiveness, and, above all, patience with which he made me realize the error of my ways sparkles on in my dimming memory as a prime specimen of that "transcendent capacity of taking trouble," which is how Thomas Carlyle, one of those very Victorians, defined genius.

My thick and obdurate skull was first infiltrated by that genius with the poem "Tywater" in Wilbur's first collection, *The Beautiful Changes* (1947). In it, Dick writes about a roughneck noncom he had in the army, the eponymous Tywater, whose chief talent was his skill in throwing the lariat. The poem ends:

> The violent, neat and practiced skill
> Was all he loved and all he learned;
> When he was hit, his body turned
> To clumsy dirt before it fell.
>
> And what to say of him, God knows.
> Such violence. And such repose.

This Tywater, as I said, was a lasso-throwing ruffian. Here now, written much later, is Wilbur's praise for the already mentioned marvelous poetess: "The voice of Anna Akhmatova is both passionate and finished, both reckless and austere." That is what makes Akhmatova and Wilbur—and even the obscure Tywater—fellows in art: the violence *and* the repose; not just one or the other, as with lesser poets.

The elegance of Richard Wilbur is proverbial, as witness not least his magisterial rhymed-verse translations of plays by Molière and Racine, where each rhymed couplet must tersely, gnomically, and chiseledly capture a chunk of world. Yet, I need hardly remind you, that bit of world caught in a couple of alexandrines or in one heroic couplet is—in Racine as in Molière as in Wilbur—also a piece of human passion, violence, recklessness brought to rest in the steadying, sustaining, reposeful embrace of eternity.

And what to say of Dick? *God* knows. *Such* violence. And *such* repose.

That was as much as I was able to say at the presentation ceremony. Here, in the more hospitable medium of print, let me add two examples of Wilbur's mastery. The first, from *Ceremony and Other Poems* (1950), is "Museum Piece." Let's take it stanza by stanza.

> The good gray guardians of art
> Patrol the halls on spongy shoes,
> Impartially protective, though
> Perhaps suspicious of Toulouse.

The scene is, presumably, the Louvre, but could be any museum with its guards in gray uniforms. "The good gray guardians" has good-natured overtones (e.g., "the good gray poet," Whitman), but here, more ambiguously, refers to the prosaic museum guards who, though performing the noble task of protecting the arts, are themselves colorless, humdrum creatures. The "spongy shoes" not only conveys the sensible footwear (silent, supportive) that their work requires, but also makes them appear pitiful and ludicrous. In their spongy way, they are as absurd as those other, self-appointed, guardians of art, the moral police. Indeed,

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these paid custodians have their own Grundyism: they are not fond of Toulouse-Lautrec, who is a bit too loose for them. Too bad that, for the rhyme, Wilbur had to abridge the name to "Toulouse," whereas the proper abbreviation is Lautrec. But never mind.

Here dozes one against the wall,
Disposed upon a funeral chair.
A Degas dancer pirouettes
Upon the parting of his hair.

The vigilance of these guards is, like that of all guardians, imperfect: *sed quis custodiet ipsos Custodes?* Ironically, though, the negligent guard is asleep on something that suggests a "funeral chair," as in portraits of heroes of antiquity in stately funerary display. Ridiculous, yes, but look how life imitates art: the fallible guard unwittingly assumes the posture of a dead hero as "disposed" by an artist. Disposed? Actually, fatally indisposed, but all the better posed for his indisposition. *Disposed* as in displayed, but really "disposed with" as far as any practical use is concerned.

The significant d's of *dozes* and *disposed* now lead us to a great double D, the "Degas dancer" in the picture above the sleeping guard; she seems to be pirouetting on the part in his hair. An ethereal dancer is supposed to be dancing on air, not hair; but as long as it is the part—the white corridor in a dark mass—this is a place of honor on that mundane head: it is almost as if the art of the dance were parting the waves of some Black Sea by dancing across it.

See how she spins! The grace is there,
But strain as well is plain to see.
Degas loved the two together:
Beauty joined to energy.

The quatrain nicely illustrates Wilbur's definition of art: beauty joined to energy, grace emerging from effort—violence *and* repose. Note the metrical change from the perfect iambics of the first two verses to the trochaic movement of the latter two. Those first lines are about the work of art, which transmutes effort into calm, lulling us with iambic regularity, not to mention the assonance and inner rhyme in *grace*, *strain*, *plain*. But the focus now switches from art to the artist. Degas the man is more impulsive, unruly than the painting, hence the—for the English ear—less idiomatic, somewhat troubling trochees.

Edgar Degas purchased once
A fine El Greco, which he kept
Against the wall beside his bed
To hang his pants on while he slept.

The trochees, less ensconced in English versification, continue—"Edgar" and "Degas" are to be pronounced with an English accent, trochaically—and flow seamlessly into "purchased." Then we revert to iambs for an art work, "a fine El Greco." But Degas turns it into a clothes rack, a pants press. Is this *lèse majesté*, the invidious way in which even a great artist treats the competition? No. Degas must have paid a pretty penny for the El Greco, but art is not to be just passively beautiful; it should prove of active use. Why not in this way? A masterpiece face forward by day; by night, face to the wall, a practical piece of furniture or equipment.

This is the proper interpenetration of art and life. The sleeping guard lives off art and returns the favor even when asleep by providing a stage for the dancer to pirouette on, one that makes her seem even more miraculous. And just such a wall as the guard dozes against becomes, together with a great painting, the artist's silent butler and pants press—note how matter-of-fact, almost doggerelish, the rhythm becomes: "Against the wall beside his bed/ To hang his pants on while he slept." For greater finality, additional slant rhyme (bed-slept) reinforces the regular rhyme scheme (kept-slept). Even the title now assumes a new meaning, "Museum Peace": sleep tight, everyone.

My second example comes from *Things of This World* (1956), and is entitled "Piazza di Spagna, Early Morning":

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I can't forget
How she stood at the top of that long
marble stair
Amazed, and then with a sleepy pirouette
Went dancing slowly down to the fountain-
quieted square;

Nothing upon her face
But some impersonal loneliness,—not then a
girl,
But as it were a reverie of the place,
A called-for falling glide and whirl;

As when a leaf, petal, or thin chip
Is drawn to the falls of a pool and, circling a
moment above it,
Rides on over the lip—
Perfectly beautiful, perfectly ignorant of it.

Notice the strategies for containing movement in the first stanza: *stood*, *sleepy*, *slowly*, *quieted*. Why? Because this is a picture from memory, where even movement stands virtually still. The man and the girl (American tourists? Wilbur and his wife?) rose betimes to see more of Rome, before the megalopolitan bustle blurs its contours. Observe how that short line, "I can't forget," stands boldly at the top of the poem, like the figure, or image of a figure, at the top of the Spanish Steps that widen, like the verses, beneath her feet. Note, too, how the enjambment, projecting *amazed* to the beginning of the next verse, makes the amazement stand out and stick.

But what is that "impersonal loneliness"? Probably that of an antique statue, the cause of whose melancholy is lost in time. Out of awe at the grandeur of Rome, the girl reverts to some ancient, archetypal wistfulness. No longer a mere girl, she is "some reverie of the place"—a *genius loci* if not, indeed, a walking statue that goes with those stairs, those fountains, that Eternal City. What does this (in both senses) moving statue represent? "A called-for falling glide and whirl." *Whirl*, because of the curvature of the stair and the joyous pirouette; *glide*, because of the grace of execution; *called-for*, because what can a mortal, transient being do but respond to the invitation of that glorious marble immutability by descending it?

Descending like "leaf, petal, or thin chip": the first pair unambiguously from nature's treasury, but the chip, though it could be tree bark, could also be from some carved wooden statue (a chip off the old—or antique—block); the girl partakes of both life and art. Yet being human and evanescent, her dancing descent is like that of a leaf or petal or bit of wood that circles for a brief, beautiful moment in the upper basin of a fountain, then, caught up in the fall of the water, rushes into the lower basin to sink into oblivion. Mortality, but mortality with such grace, such flawless beauty, because its passing is so naïve and unself-conscious: so natural, not pleading to be noticed but, like an antique statue, bathed in some impersonal loneliness. Piazza di Spagna, early morning. Or early mourning? A reverie of the place.

Richard Wilbur is the son of a painter, and is himself a painter in words. But he is more: both Degas the painter and the dancer painted by him; the eternal steps and the fleeting girl descending them. His is the excitement of the creator and the fixity of the created—the violence and the repose.

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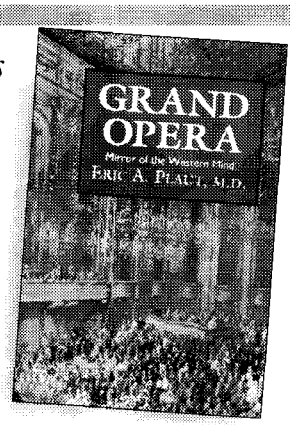

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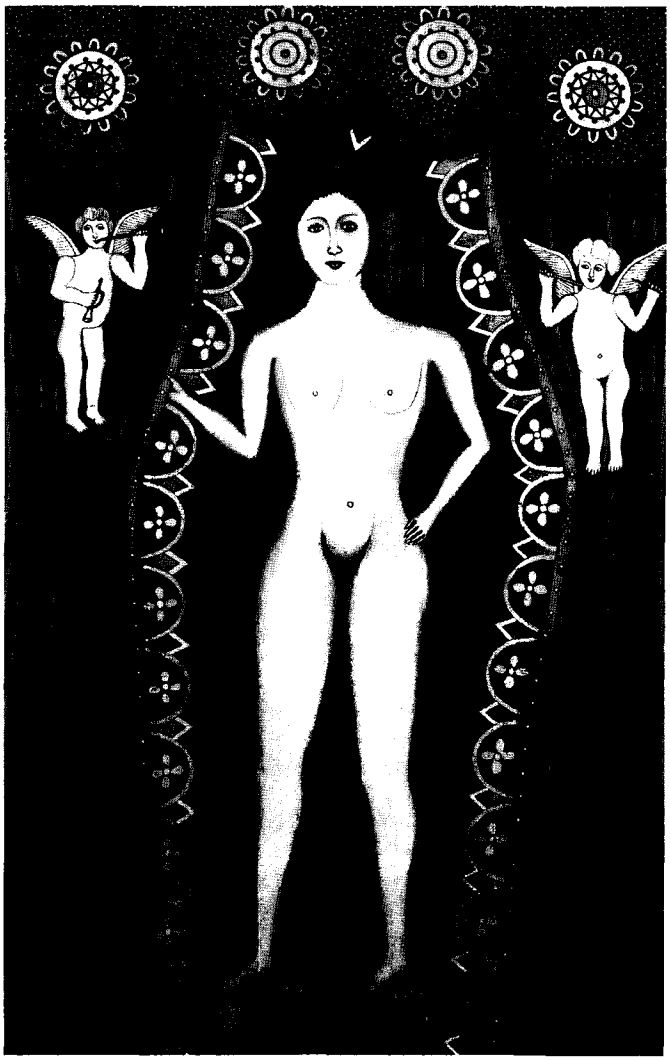

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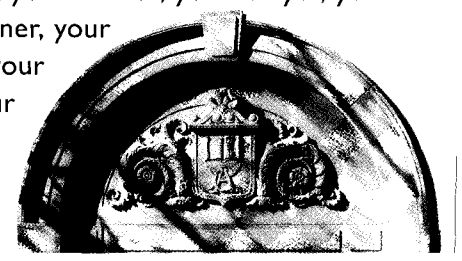

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